

Becoming Jane by gwishin

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Eleven/Eggos is the main OTP lets be real, F/M, Future Fic, Gen, I just wanted to make them all live in the 90s, Little babies are in college now, Romance, angsty fluff

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Karen Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven & Mike Wheeler, Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Mike Wheeler/OFC

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Summary:

8 years after the final confrontation with the Demogorgon, Eleven is finally allowed to return to Hawkins. She didn't know what to expect, but it certainly wasn't anything like what she ended up finding: Eggos now came in 4 flavors, Dustin Henderson grew teeth and grew hot, Will Byers had disappeared once again, and all of Hawkins was buzzing with gossip over Mike Wheeler's new college girlfriend.

1. Too Much Sun

Notes for the Chapter:

Disclaimer: The show Stranger Things and the characters all belong to Netflix. I, unfortunately, am not Netflix.

The sequel that exists only in my head, but that was begging to be let out.

Genre for this is Flangst, which is the wonderful mix of Fluff and Angst (more of the former than the latter, I promise!)

December 26th 1991

The patrol car was still a piece of shit. That was the main thought that ran through Hopper's mind as the aforementioned piece of shit slid and drifted to a shaky halt in front of the guard hut at Hawkins National Laboratory.

“Name?”

“Jim Hopper. I should be on the permanent guest list”

The guard lazily flipped through the pages of his information binder, looking over at the man in front of him.

“Police?” he asked, nodding his head towards the insignia on the side of the car.

“Yeah”

The guard whistled. “It’s the day after Christmas. You think they’d give you guys some time off”

“Well, you know, crime never sleeps and all that”

“No crime here in the Lab, though, right?” the guard asked as he located the chief’s name and opened the gate for him.

Hopper shrugged at the man before driving off. “Let’s hope not”

The pathway from the gate to the main entrance of the Lab was thankfully impeccably shoveled and the car had no trouble as it chugged along. Hopper couldn’t remember the last time that he had been in the Lab. Well, that was a lie. He could clearly remember the last time he had been here, but it had been 8 years and what seemed like lifetimes ago. The feeling of the place hadn’t changed a bit. The ugly grey cement building still gave him the creeps.

Hopper parked the car in the empty front lot, making sure his gun was securely holstered to his side before getting out. The guard in the front shack had obviously warned the people inside the Lab of his arrival because no sooner had he stepped into the lobby of the building did a familiar lady rush out to meet him, high heels click clacking on the tile floor.

She had the same bright red hair that she had 8 years before, but

now it was shot through with a few too many grays. Her eyes were still cold. Hopper racked his brains, trying to remember her name.

Priest...Prestle...he never had been good at remembering people who didn't matter.

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*November 25th, 1983*

*“My name is Eleanor Preston. I work with the US Department of Energy”*

*“Jim Hopper. Mind telling me what the hell I’m doing here?”*

*To say Hopper had been less than enthusiastic about being picked up by two men in suits in front of the hospital would have been an overstatement. That un-enthusiasm had only grown tenfold when he realized where those men in suits were taking him. Hawkins Labs was not exactly his favorite place in the world at the moment. Or at any time, really.*

*“Well, Mr. Hopper...we at Hawkins Laboratory were hoping that we could strike a deal with you concerning our project”*

*Jim was silent, causing the woman to continue on.*

*“We were successful at locating and reclaiming the project in the Nether,*

*but ever since she was brought back she has been rather...apathetic. Refuses to regain her energy or communicate. We know that you were acquainted with the project during her little indiscretion, so we wanted you to convince her to work with us again.”*

*“I’m sorry...what project are you talking about?”*

*Eleanor looked a little surprised, hand tucking a lock of bright red hair behind her ear nervously. “Project Eleven, of course”*

*“Eleven? El?...like the little girl? She’s alive?”*

*“Yes” Eleanor said with a slight sigh. She looked extremely tired. “As I said before, our team managed to reclaim her from the Nether. She is highly weakened, but alive”*

*“And you want me to convince her to let you guys use her as a science experiment again?”*

*“That is a crude way of stating it, but essentially yes”*

*Hopper looked at the woman in front of him as though she was crazy, which he was starting to become convinced she might actually be. “And why the hell do you think I would do that?”*

*“We need the project to help aid us in the Cold War, Mr. Hopper...”*

*“If you think for a moment that I give a damn about the Cold War and what you need then...”*

*“As I was saying” Eleanor continued “we need the project to help aid us during the Cold War, as a matter of national security. After we are no longer in a war state, then we will grant her freedom and she can leave if she pleases.”*

Hopper snorted. *“You’ve got four boys out there who think this little girl is gone; and once she realizes that they’re still out there looking for her she could easily kill every goddamn person in this nuthouse and leave herself.”*

*“Yes, we are aware of that. That is why if you cannot convince her to stay and help us, we must be forced to decommission her”*

*“Decommission?”*

Eleanor raised both eyebrows. *“It means to put her down, Mr. Hopper. She is too great of a threat for us to keep as a prisoner. That is why she either needs to be convinced to stay here and help us willingly until the end of the war, or else she will be put down permanently.”*

*“Let me get this straight. If I don’t help convince this girl to stay here and become a little weapon for you, you’ll kill her?”*

*“Yes. Though we do hope it doesn’t come down to that. She could be a*

*wonderful asset to the US Government”*

*Hopper stared at the lady in front of him. Stared at the table. His hands. The floor. He didn’t want to get caught up in this; had hoped that giving Brenner Eleven’s location would have been the last he heard of the Labs and human experiments. Even now he knew he should just walk away. This didn’t concern him. As far as Hawkins knew, Will was just a boy who had been miraculously found. They didn’t need to be swept up in what the Labs did anymore than they already had.*

*However, he couldn’t get the image of that little girl out of his mind. How scared she had been in that tub, how small she had looked in that oversized dress. And he knew that beyond anything else, there was no way he would let another little girl die.*

*He looked up at the redhead lady. “Only until the war is over?”*

*“You have our word”*

*Hopper nodded. “Fine. I’ll help convince her. But I have a condition too”*

*Eleanor looked wary. “What?”*

*“You’ll allow me to send her small packages every now and then”*

*“If you think we’re naive enough to allow you send her weapons or....”*

*“No weapons” Hopper said quickly. “No messages or anything, even. Just some small gifts or food every couple of months”*

*“I assure you that we’ll be feeding the project” Eleanor deadpanned.*

*Hopper rolled his eyes. “Sure. I don’t know what slop you people here call food, but that poor girl was malnourished and starving last time she escaped”*

*“Fine. You can bring her food every so often. We’ll set out a drop box in the woods outside of the facility for you to place it in. And in return, you must keep Project Eleven’s return a secret until she is released. We do not want those boys coming by the Labs while we are performing any tests. It is not safe for them.”*

*“Okay” Hopper said. He shook hands with the woman and both of them stood up, ready to walk out of the room.*

*“Oh, and one last thing” the police chief said, looking over at Eleanor. “Don’t shave her head again. She’s not a prisoner so don’t treat her like one”*

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“Mr. Hopper! This is a surprise! What do I owe this visit to?”

Hopper didn’t say anything. Just reached into his pocket and pulled

out a crumpled newspaper. The front page was crinkled and distorted but the headline was clear as was the picture above it. A proud Russian Federation Flag flew over the Kremlin; the words “Soviet Union Dissolved” written in bold below.

“A deal is a deal”

Eleanor pursed her lips. “Yes, well...”

“You said she was free when the war ended”

“Just because the war is over does not mean that our country is out of danger. I think it would be wise to...”

There was a loud click and Eleanor found herself face to face with the muzzle of Hopper’s gun. “You said she was free when the war ended”

Eleanor swallowed hard, turning on her heels. “It was only a suggestion. But it seems you’re not in the mood for negotiations. Fine. Follow me.”

“You’ve become a lot more accommodating in the past 8 years” Hopper said with a slight smile as he lowered the gun, not holstering it again though.

“And you are still as *charming* as ever” the redhead lady sniffed as she led the police chief down a maze of hallways, swiping her ID card

every now and then to open doors along the way. “I must warn you, the project has kept herself in almost near isolation since the time that she was relocated to the Labs. She may not be what you remember from the past”

“Like any of us are”

They reached a room at the end of a pristine, white hallway. Eleanor placed her card against a small metal reader and after a few seconds, the door to the room wooshed open, revealing the contents inside.

It was a large enough room—much larger than the one Hopper had seen years back when he had snuck into the Labs for the first time. The floors were white tile, but the walls were painted a pale yellow. They were bare and the only piece of furniture was a bed that had a matching sunny sheet set.

However it wasn’t the room or the bed that caught Hopper’s attention, but rather the young woman that sat cross-legged on top of the yellow comforter. She was lanky; navy sweatpants and t-shirt hanging loose on her body. Her face had shadows of familiarity: huge hazel eyes shining from amidst delicate, almost elfin features. Her skin had an even olive tinge and her hair...her hair! It was long: dry and dull from lack of natural light, but a pretty chestnut color and fell nearly to her waist.

The difference between a 12 and 20 year old was of course stark, but there was enough of that scrawny little girl left in her to be recognizable, to be familiar. After all these years she was still the same little girl.

And Eleven seemed to think the same thing about Hopper, recognition immediately filling those too-large eyes.

“What are you doing here?” she asked. Her voice was a little deeper, a little hoarse. Hopper handed her the newspaper, letting the girl read the headline and whatever else she wanted.

A ghost of a smile crossed Eleven’s lips. “You promised”

“That I did. We’re leaving here now”

Eleven just nodded and stood up. She was taller than Hopper expected her to be, with the malnutrition and lack of sunlight hindering her growth, but he remembered that she had been born with unique DNA after all. There was nothing about the girl that should still surprise him.

“Project Eleven” Eleanor said, stepping towards the girl, “you know that you can come back here whenever you want”

Eleven nodded.

“Remember the rules that we went over. They are for everyone’s safety and we will not hesitate to take action if any of them are broken”

Another nod.

“And I should remind you that *he* would still like to see you often if you can spare some time out of your new life”

This time Eleven nodded much more reluctantly and Hopper decided that it was high time that both of them get out of there. He placed an arm around the girl’s slight shoulders and led them both down out of the room and down the hallway.

“Not even out of the building and already laying a guilt trip on you. What are we going to do with these government fucks?”

Eleven just smiled. Hopper looked down at her and knitted his eyebrows.

“You got a jacket, kid? It's the middle of winter out there”

“I can handle cold”

“Not like an Indiana winter, you can’t” Hopper said, taking off his jacket and placing it on her shoulders. “You don’t have any clothes to bring with you?”

The girl shook her head and Hopper couldn’t stop himself from sending a baleful glare at Eleanor. The woman ignored everything, just swiping them through the series of doors before they reached the main lobby. She hesitated one last time as she turned towards the

police chief.

“Mr. Hopper, I must urge you once again to rethink this situation. There are many things which...”

“Which you can stick up your ass. A deal is a deal. The girl is going with me”

“Yes, well...when you bring her back, don’t say I didn’t try to warn you” Eleanor sniffed.

“Yeah, I’ll try to contain myself”

Hopper and Eleven stepped outside of the Labs into the cold. Immediately, Eleven shirked back. She hadn’t been outside in 8 years, and even before then had never really experienced the full blast of winter. It was daytime but the wind blew harshly and she felt chilled straight to her bones, almost as if she was back in the Upside Down.

“I told you that you weren’t used to this. It’ll get better once we get the car heater running.” Hopper said, opening the passenger side door to let he girl in. Eleven slipped into the seat, holding the man’s jacket tighter against her body. The heater slowly started to crank to life as Hopper started the car.

“It’ll take a few minutes for this piece of junk heater to work. But we don’t have that long of a ride anyways, so it won’t be uncomfortable for long”

They started to drive down the long roadway and Eleven looked at the slowly disappearing Lab behind her. They passed through the security gate with no problem at all, the guard waving them through with a smile and a 'Happy Holidays'.

"I cannot believe they are just letting me go"

"You talk a lot better then I remember" Hopper noted. The girl just gave him a look as though to say that it was obvious a 20 year old would be able to talk better than the awkward 12 year old he had known. But he just ignored it and went on. "Plus I'm sure that it wasn't as easy as that. They'll probably be stalking you for awhile"

"Stalking?"

"Yeah, like following you around. Creepy stuff. They're that kind of people"

Eleven nodded. "You mean government fucks"

Hopper groaned. "You're too young to be saying things like that"

"I am 20"

"Still way too young. Do me a favor and don't let Joyce know that I

taught you that phrase, okay?”

Eleven looked up, suddenly nervous all over again. “Joyce?”

“Yeah, you remember Joyce. Will Byers' mom. I talked to her yesterday and we decided it would be best for you to stay with her for awhile.”

“Not with you?”

Hopper sighed as he turned off the main road onto the small dirt path that would lead to the Byers' place, thankful that they lived so close to the Labs “I haven't had someone live with me in a really long time. Plus, I thought it would be good for you to stay with a woman. You know, in case you have...woman problems”

Eleven stayed silent for a moment. “If you mean menstruation, I already know how to take care of that”

Hopper sputtered, hitting the breaks a little too hard as they pulled up in front of the house. Eleven jerked in her seat like a rag doll but her face stayed impassive. “Christ, kid, we got to work on that mouth of yours. And no, I don't mean things like that. I'm just...I don't think I'd be a very good parental figure. Joyce did right by her two boys, even with the way everything turned out. She'll be good for you. And I think having you around will be good for her too.”

Eleven played with her seatbelt a little, looking out the car window

at the Byers' house before turning back to Hopper. "You will come visit sometimes?"

"Yeah. I can come visit whenever you want. Joyce has the numbers for my place plus my office at the station. You call and I'll come over"

The door to the house opened and both Hopper and Eleven watched as Joyce stepped out, wearing a large wool sweater over some festive christmas pajamas. She craned her head, mouth widening in a smile as she saw the two of them sitting in the car.

"Looks like she's eager to see you" Hopper grinned. He leaned over and undid Eleven's seatbelt before opening her door.

"I could have opened it"

"You're going to be living with Joyce from now on, get used to being spoiled sometimes."

The girl nodded. She moved to leave the car but then hesitated for a second, turing back to the man next to her. "Hopper..."

"Yeah, kid?"

"All these years...you...thank you for the eggos"

Eleven stepped out of the patrol car and was almost immediately engulfed by an overeager Joyce. The older woman loosened her embrace and took a few seconds to observe the young girl's features. She laughed as she ran a shaky hand through Eleven's long hair.

"Welcome home, El"

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"Mike! Phone call for you!"

Mike groaned as he got up from the sofa: already feeling a little too stuffed after breakfast. He had only been home for winter break for five days now and his mother was determined to fatten him up a little bit. Not that it would really work. Mike thought he was just doomed to forever be the guy who was too awkwardly scrawny for his own body.

"It's Joyce" Karen said as she passed the phone to her son.

"Mrs. Byers?" Mike asked as he took the phone. It wasn't unusual for the older lady to call every now and then to make sure that the boys were okay, but they had just seen each other yesterday when Mike went by her house to drop off Christmas gifts. Though that interaction had been weird too, now that he thought back on it. Jim Hopper had been there for some reason and him and Joyce were in deep conversation about something to do with Russia.

“Mike! How are you?”

“I’m doing okay, Mrs. Byers. Did you need something?”

“Yes...well...I was wondering if you could come to my house today. You and the rest of the boys. It’s ...well, just come over if you can”

Mike felt his stomach drop hard. “Is it Will? Did something happen?”

“No! Maybe...it’s complicated. If you boys could just drop by sometime, it would be great. I’ll phone the others”

“Yeah. Of course. Dustin is staying over at Lucas’ place. We’ll get there as soon as we can” Mike said as he hung up. He just stared at the phone for a few seconds, wondering what was going on. Even though Mrs. Byers had said it wasn’t about Will, Mike had a sinking feeling that it was.

“Everything okay?” Karen asked, looking at her son. It amazed her that no matter how much Mike had grown, he still looked like the same little boy that she raised. Sure he was taller now, his hair grown out more in some sort of rebellious phase; but he still had that same slight build, same pale skin, same sharp features that earned him a multitude of not so pleasant nicknames back in his school days. Karen had always secretly hoped that her boy would grow into his features, but she did admit that they had sort of became his charm over all these years.

“Everything’s fine” Mike said quickly. “Mrs. Byers just wanted me and the boys to come over today. I think she has something for us”

“Why couldn’t she just give it to you yesterday when you went by her place? It’s a shame that you’ll have to leave Amanda home by herself again. Not very good behavior for a host.”

Mike glanced over at the living room where the pretty blonde girl was sitting on the sofa he had just left. He felt that sinking feeling in his stomach all over again.

“It probably won’t be for long. You know this time of year is hard on Mrs. Byers”

Karen’s eyes softened. “I know. Here, take this cake with you okay? A christmas cake aways cheers people up”

“Thanks mom” Mike said, going back to the living room as Karen started to wrap the prettily decorated cake that she had made the day before. He walked over the the sofa and placed his hand on Amanda’s shoulder.

“Hey, I have to run out real quick. Mrs. Byers wanted us to swing by her place for a minute”

“Oh again?” the girl said, looking up at him. “You want me to come along?”

“No, just stay here. It’ll be really quick”

Amanda nodded, sitting up a bit to give him a quick kiss before diverting her attention back to the program that was playing on the TV.

Mike nodded as he went back into the kitchen, waiting a few minutes for his mom to finish wrapping the cake before grabbing it and heading out. He didn’t know how to deal with a lot of things and right now Amanda was at the top of his list.

It wasn’t something that he liked to talk about much because honestly, it made him seem a little (or a lot) pathetic. The grand tragedy of Mike Wheeler. Lost the love of his life at the ripe old age of 12 and became hopeless afterwards.

Well, to blame it all on El’s disappearance wasn’t fair. Of course that had hit him hard, but everything that came afterwards was just as bad. It was difficult growing up in the aftermath. Sure, they all tried to be normal and there were days where they were. But there were also days when flashes of the Demogorgon kept them up all night, driving them insane. The fact that any sort of flickering lights would send them into panic. There was walking past the freezer aisle in a grocery store and seeing eggos. There was never being able to listen to The Clash without instantly feeling cold. There was watching Will close himself up more and more: haunted by memories of his time in the Upside Down.

None of that had led to being able to have much in the form of proper interactions with other people. Amanda was Mike’s first real

girlfriend and he still wasn't sure what to do with her. She had latched onto him during their freshman year at Purdue and on the surface, she really was perfect for him. Just yesterday she had figured out how to simultaneously hook up the VCR, stereo, and Super Nintendo to the TV in order to let Dustin record himself playing Super Mario World for half an hour onto a VHS tape, complete with a background soundtrack of Metallica's *Enter Sandman*. His family loved her, the whole town of Hawkins already loved her even though this had been the first time he had ever brought her home during break.

Mike really did like Amanda. Maybe even loved her, too.

But he couldn't help to notice the fact that her hair was blonde, cut in a way that closely resembled a certain wig that was engrained in his memories. That her eyes were large and pretty and hazel. That he wasn't sure if he had ever gotten over a girl who had been dead for 8 years and how pathetic could he even get?

He stopped his car in front of Mrs. Byers' house just in time to see Dustin and Lucas pull up in Lucas' dad's old beater. They all got out and looked at each other.

"You know anything we don't?" Lucas asked.

Mike shook his head as they walked up to front door. "I guess we'll find out soon enough"

**Notes for the Chapter:**

This chapter was mostly for setting everything up, so not a lot of action. I know with all the kids being 20 now there is the concern with the loss of the innocence that made them so endearing in the first place, but I will try to keep that in. They're definitely more grown up and cynical now, but also none of them had a very normal childhood so they do still cling onto that innocence when they can. The 80s setting was such a huge and wonderful part of the show, and I wanted to try something similar with the 90s in this sequel in my head. So the little bit of added grunge will fit the timeline well :)

Next chapter will have the Boys meeting El, the discovery of new flavors of Eggos, and the beginning of Mike's essential 90s existential crisis

## **2. Another You**

### **Summary for the Chapter:**

In this chapter the boys meet Eleven again, hijinks ensue with shopping carts, El is reunited with eggos, and Mike finds himself in a state of shock.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Disclaimer: The show Stranger Things and the characters all belong to Netflix. I, unfortunately, am not Netflix.

The is a sequel that existed only in my head, but was begging to be let out.

Genre for this is Flangst, which is the wonderful mix of Fluff and Angst (more of the former than the latter, I promise!)

Joyce ran a hand through her hair nervously as she showed Eleven around the place that would be her new home for the foreseeable future.

“Hop really only told me yesterday about everything so I didn’t have a lot of time to get things ready. But I managed to get new sheets for the bed in Will’s old room and Jonathan hooked a stereo up in there if you...well, I don’t really know if you’re into music like my boys are, but just in case you wanted it...”

“Thank you” El said softly, cutting off the woman’s nervous ramblings. “It is nice here”

“It’s nothing special” Joyce laughed “Jonathan and I work some crazy hours so we don’t get to clean much, and I can’t really promise you anything great in the way of cooking either: we’re both kind of hopeless. But...we get by...”

Eleven looked around at the living room. The walls and curtains and well worn sofa all had pretty floral prints, the carpet was soft underneath the thin soles of the cheap trainers she had been provided at the Lab, and there was a shaggy dog sitting next to a slightly lopsided Christmas tree. A fire burned cheerily in the nicked, ash-dusted fireplace. It reminded her of the homes she would sometimes see in the Christmas specials that Eleanor would put on when she was in a particularly good mood.

“Your house looks like a home”

“Our house” Joyce corrected. She turned towards El and took one of the girl’s hands in her own. “I want you to think of this as your house too from now on, okay?”

Eleven had never had a house before. She hadn’t had anything more than a room with a bed and walls that she was allowed to have painted yellow after she refused to eat for 4 days. So she didn’t know what to do with what Joyce was telling her. But the words felt warm to her nevertheless. Thank you seemed like not enough to say so instead she squeezed Joyce’s hand and gave her a small smile.

Joyce smiled back, taking a moment to look over the girl once again. Of course she hadn’t expected Eleven to look like a 12 year old girl but it still amazed her at how much the girl had changed. She was taller than Joyce now but really too thin for her frame. Joyce made a mental note to call Karen and ask her to bring some dishes over later.

She didn't like the way the girl's shirt hung so loosely on her body...

...and she didn't much like the shirt in general, now that she got a good look at it. The Hawkins National Laboratory logo emblazoned on the front did not bring up the best of memories.

"I put some clothes of mine in the dresser in your room so you can change. They're a bit old and probably a little short for you, but they'll have to do until we can take you out shopping" Joyce said as she led the girl down the hallway to the room that she tried not to go into much these days. In fact, yesterday had been the first time in months that she had stepped into it in order to change the sheets and clean up a little.

"I'll give you a bit of privacy to change and get settled in. The bathroom is right here if you want to take a quick shower as well. I put out a clean towel for you. Jonathan will be finished with his shift at 2 so maybe we could do something all together this evening...if you're not too tired..."

"That sounds nice" Eleven said. She slipped into the room to grab some clothes before quietly walking into the bathroom. Joyce watched the door close silently and marveled at how different girls were from boys.

The sound of the shower starting woke her from her thoughts. She headed back towards the front of the house, going into the kitchen to heat up some water to make hot chocolate. As she put the kettle under the tap, Joyce decided that maybe having some familiar faces around as a welcome would be nice for the younger girl. It would help give her some sort of much-needed familiarity. Plus she was sure that the boys would be glad to see their old friend again after all

these years.

Feeling a pang in her chest, the way she did every time she thought about Will's friends, Joyce picked up the phone and called the Wheeler house.

The boys arrived much sooner than she expected: only about 10 minutes after she had finished making her calls. Even though Joyce had lived in Hawkins her whole life, it still sometimes took her back how small this town really was.

She opened the door before the boys even had a chance to knock, shuffling them into the house with a smile. She knew they were probably confused out of their minds and most likely a little worried about her mental state at this point. She had just seen them all the day before after all, so it wasn't expected that she'd call them over again so soon.

"Hi Mrs. Byers" Mike said, always the most thoughtful of the kids "Is everything okay over here?"

"Yeah. Everything here is great. I didn't expect you boys to come over so quickly! Have a seat" Joyce said as she ushered them to the sofa. She was rambling a bit without thinking "Maybe it's best that she's still in the bathroom, don't want to shock the poor thing. She might have a heart attack"

"She?" Dustin asked, looking over at the other two. Mike and Lucas shrugged, both of them just as confused as he was. "Did...you adopt a new puppy?"

“What?” Joyce asked “A puppy? No...no, one dog is quite enough for this house”

The boys watched as she walked over to the bathroom near the back of the house and knocked on the door, softly talking to whatever was on the other side. “Hey, baby girl, are you done in there yet? There’s some people here to see you”

“Baby girl?” Mike mouthed towards his two friends. Dustin threw his arms up in the air while Lucas leaned forward to whisper conspiringly.

“Do you think Mrs. Byers adopted some kid?”

“Why would she adopt a kid?” Mike asked: eyebrows drawn together.

“Unless Jonathan is in that bathroom and she’s calling him baby girl, I think maybe she did adopt a kid” Dustin added in.

The kettle on the stove started whistling and Joyce craned her head towards the living room. “Can one of you boys go and turn the stove off?”

Immediately Dustin and Lucas shot up, hurrying towards the kitchen while making faces at Mike who was left sitting awkwardly alone on the sofa. They were crossing the hallway into the kitchen when the

bathroom door opened creakily.

Dustin looked over just in time to see a strangely familiar girl walk out of the room. He froze in place, eyes widening as his brain tried to comprehend what the rest of his body couldn't believe. There was no way...after all these years...it couldn't be...

"Holy shit" he breathed out. Lucas turned his head in concern and found himself rooted in place too as he saw the girl at the end of the hallway.

"No way...."

Eleven had picked out what she thought was the prettiest of the clothes Joyce had: an old royal blue sweater that was soft and covered with cream colored snowflakes and a pair of fawn pants that turned out to be way too short for her, ending at an awkward midpoint on her calves. But they were still much prettier than anything she had ever worn at the Labs and by the time she exited the bathroom in a cloud of steam, her skin smelling like Irish Spring and rubbed squeaky clean, Eleven felt better than anytime she could remember.

She had expected to spend a little bit more time with Joyce, maybe even take a short nap or observe the Byers family dog for a bit. What she hadn't expected was to come out of the bathroom and find herself instantly transported to 8 years ago.

The two boys...men...in front of her were so different but she knew who they were right away. It was like the pattern on the old quilt

that hung over Joyce's sofa: the threads were warm and familiar even if the original picture had faded.

They were both so much taller now: Lucas obviously muscled even under his baggy sweater, his hair shaved at the sides and cut flat on the top. Dustin was taller still, leaned down and trim, curly wild hair flopping lazily into blue-green eyes. But they filled Eleven with that same sense of warmth, that feeling that she knew well and could only describe as 'friendship'. Even after all these years, it was immediate and it was the same.

She shuffled nervously in place. "Um...hi..."

"It really is you" Lucas said, half breath-half laugh. Dustin smiled and it was so familiar that Eleven ached. He rushed forward and crushed her in a bear hug, lifting her up and swinging her around like she was a small child.

"Holy shit! It's really you! You...you have hair now!"

Lucas was right next to them in a split second. "Where did you....you worried us, you little punk". Eleven looked at him, apologetically, but there was nothing but warmth in those brown eyes as he too brought the girl into a deep hug.

"I can't believe you're here" Dustin laughed. "And...you're okay! You're okay, right? And...you have hair!!"

Lucas looked behind them at the empty hallway. “Mike, get your ass over here now!”

Mike sat, rooted in place, on the sofa. He was clutching onto the fabric underneath his palms so hard that his knuckles were going white. He had seen his friends’ shock, their faces, their exclamations and he wasn’t a stupid kid, so he had a very good idea of what was going on...

But he couldn’t bring himself to believe it.

He had enough heartbreak when it came to this. Enough nights of sitting in front of the Hawkins’ Lab fence, compasses splayed out in front of him as though they could lead him where he needed to go. Enough times of combing the forest, trying to find that tree Nancy told him she had gone through to get to the Upside Down. Spending the Snow Ball sitting near the mini fridge behind the gym eating stolen pudding with Dustin; spending Homecoming with Will in the Byers’ house, trying to stop himself from turning on all the Christmas lights that Will had now put up in his room; spending Senior Prom in the fort in his basement, eating frozen waffles at midnight as the rest of the boys lay passed out near the D&D table.

“Mike!”

He looked up and saw Lucas standing in front of him, a weird expression on his face. “Dude, get up. You’re never going to guess who’s here”

“We have a special guest, back from the dead!” Dustin announced

loudly as he came into the living room, dragging the poor girl behind him.

“I never died” Eleven mumbled as she was pushed forward.

And there she was. Reedy, tall, wearing an old sweater that Mike had helped his mom pick out for Joyce many Christmases ago. Her hair was bone straight and brown—nothing at all like that wig that they had picked out for her back then—but the only thing that Mike noticed were her eyes, which were the exact same as they had been eight years ago.

“Hi, Mike”

Like that, the spell was broken. Mike jumped to his feet. He had no idea what his eyes or mouth were doing at that point, probably something highly unattractive. But it didn’t really matter. El was back.

“You’re back” he said, his own voice sounding almost foreign to him. Eleven nodded.

“For good? You’re not going to leave again?”

A whisper of a smile crossed the girl’s lips. “For good”

There were so many things that Mike wanted to asked, needed to

know. Too many questions that were pounding through his brain. But Lucas was grabbing him by the collar of his sweatshirt, pulling him forward.

“The poor kid needs a hug, El” his so-called best friend said, wiggling his eyebrows. “He’s in shock”

And then there was just warmth surrounding him. Warm arms pressed against his back, soft hairin his face. The sense of relief that filled his body nearly choked him as he hugged El back. The back of his eyes burned and he pressed his face into her shoulder.

“You’re back” the giddiness came up and out of him in the form of airy chuckles. “You’re really, really back”

“Really, really back” she echoed, her eyes turning mischievous for a second before adding on “for good”

Joyce stood by the kitchen, watching the little reunion. It had been a long time since she had seen smiles like this from the boys. Having Eleven back was already becoming everything that her and Hopper had hoped it would be.

“You boys should stay for lunch” she said quickly. “After all, you probably have a lot to talk about. I’ll make something”

She hurried into the kitchen, opening the fridge and finding...well, nothing useful. Her and Jonathan usually ordered something in most

days, both of them too busy at the end of the work day to muster the energy to cook anything. But that had to change now that there was actually someone around that they needed to cook for. It had been a few years since...

Joyce shook her head and straightened up as she closed the fridge door.“I’m going to go to the supermarket real quick. We don’t have much in the house. You kids stay here and catch up a little”

“It’s okay, Mrs. Byers, we can go” Lucas said. “Just write down a list of things you need”

“But...”

“It’ll be cool to take El outside for a little bit, show her around town. It’s different now”

And that was true. But Lucas was also looking at Mike, who despite the grin on his face, looked like he was about two seconds away from having a full fledged panic attack. They all knew that Mike had taken it the hardest after El’s disappearance. Lucas especially couldn’t forget finding his half-frozen friend sitting on the edge of the quarry above the lake the winter they had started high school.

*‘Do you think if I jumped, El would come back to save me again?’*

They hadn’t let Mike go out exploring on his own again after that. Instead, the other three boys all worked odd jobs over the summer so

that they could afford to buy a small headstone which they had placed in the Hawkins cemetery. It only had the number 11 engraved on it, but it became a much-needed place for them go to and visit when they wanted to remember their lost friend or when memories of that one life-changing week became too overwhelming.

Even after they had all left for college, Lucas knew Mike went to visit that grave every time he was back in Hawkins. He had said goodbye to El countless times over the years. To have her back now was almost more than Lucas could handle, so it had to be even more shocking for Mike. Going outside in the fresh air would be good for him.

“Well...okay” Joyce said still sounding a little hesitant. “But you boys be careful with her, okay? She just got here today and is probably tired...”

“I’m fine” Eleven said softly.

“Oh, I know. It’s just hard not to think of you as that little 12 year old. All of you kids, really” Joyce said with a small laugh. She started writing down a list of things of things that she needed from the store.

“It’ll be fun to show you around town again” Dustin said happily. “Well, not again. We never really got to take you around last time. But now we can give you the grand tour. It includes the scene of the very crucial time in Hawkins history when Lucas tried to breakdance to impress some ladies back in high school and totally ate it”

“Ate what?” Eleven asked.

“The ground”

“We didn’t have a lot of luck with ladies in high school” Lucas added in, rolling his eyes.

Dustin sighed. “Yeah, no luck with the ladies at all until college”

“Do we have to talk about this?” Mike asked quickly, scowling. “El just came back and the first thing that you talk about is girls”

“We’re guys” Lucas said at the same time that Dustin answered “Hey, I also talked about Lucas eating it!”

“It’s okay” Eleven smiled, looking up at Mike. “It’s interesting”

“Those two’s lack of love life is more depressing than interesting, trust me”

“Finally Wheeler is cracking jokes” Dustin gushed.

“Yeah, we thought you were just trying to be all manly and stoic to impress El”

Mike growled. “You two idiots need to go to hell”

Joyce walked up next to Eleven as the three boys digressed into petty bantering, telling each other exactly what holes they should stuff things into. The older woman laughed and put a comforting hand on Eleven’s back.

“Are you going to be okay with those three?”

Eleven nodded. “It’s nice. I was worried but...they are the same”

“That’s true. I never had to worry about those boys changing a bit. It was sort of nice to be one of the only moms who didn’t have to be concerned about prom night”

The boys stopped fighting and looked over at Joyce and Eleven, a little sheepish. The woman just shook her head and passed Mike the grocery list that she had made along with some cash. She was just as glad as Eleven that the boys were still the same. The young girl already had too many changes going on in her life, having a little piece of familiarity was just what she needed.

“You boys take care of her, okay?” Joyce warned, no real heat in her voice.

“Yes Mrs. Byers” three voices chorused back. Lucas and Dustin started towards the front door and Mike put his hand on Eleven’s shoulder. The girl looked at him curiously.

"You don't have a jacket on, El" Mike said, his voice soft and gentle like it always was. "Here you can wear mine. It's a little big but that's probably good, right?"

He took off his bright blue jacket and placed it over the girl's shoulders. Joyce tried hard not to laugh as she shook her head.

"We have jackets" the woman said, pointing to the rack by the door where a collection of coats that belonged to her and Jonathan hung. The jacket Hopper had given El was there as well.

"Oh...yeah" Mike mumbled.

El clutched the blue jacket closer to her. It was warm and it smelled like the Wheeler's home: cookies and floral candles and clean laundry. Like she was back in that basement fort, safe from all the bad people in the world. "It's okay. I like Mike's jacket"

Mike flushed red before he could even try to stop himself. "That's good! You can wear it...I'll borrow one of Jonathan's"

"Well now that that terribly important situation has been taken care of, let's get a move on" Dustin said, opening the front door. Mike scowled as he grabbed a jacket at random from the rack and followed him outside. It was only when he put it on and noticed a couple of floral buttons on the sleeve did he even realize it was Joyce's. But the two boys and Eleven were already getting into Lucas' car by that point, so he decided to just roll with it. He climbed into the back seat

along with Eleven, letting Dustin claim the front.

“No more bikes” the girl said, running her hands over the worn leather of the seat.

“Oh god, those old things” Dustin answered. “We haven’t ridden those since...”

“Probably when we turned 16” Mike finished. “I got my first car then and you guys made me drive you around everywhere”

“You do not miss them?”

“The bikes?” Mike asked. Eleven nodded. “Not really, I mean they got too small for us pretty quickly and it’s easier to get around in cars”

“I learned to ride a bike” Eleven said simply. It had been one of the gifts that Hopper had been allowed to send her during Christmas three years after she’d been living back in the Lab. It was a glittery pink thing with streamers on the handles and Eleanor let her ride it around empty test rooms whenever she did exceptionally well at her tasks for the day.

“El...you were able to ride a bike where you were?” Mike asked. The other two boys fell silent, obviously just as curious as Mike about where the girl had been for the past eight years. Eleven knew what he was trying to ask and didn’t really know how much she could say. Eleanor had given her strict rules...but nobody from the Lab was

there with her right then.

“They let me ride the bike sometimes, but I grew too big for it also”

“They?”

“The people in the lab”

“You were in the lab? Hawkins lab?” Dustin asked. Eleven nodded and Mike kicked the back of Lucas’ seat.

“I told you she was in the lab! You said it was impossible but I knew she was there”

“Don’t kick my seat when I’m driving!” Lucas cried. “And I thought she could be there at first. Remember, I even helped you look for her. But after a few years I started to...I’m sorry, El. It was just a long time”

“No sorrys. You did not know”

Mike bit his lower lip “Did you escape? Are the people in the Labs after you again? Because if they are, we can totally get you out of Hawkins now. All of us go to college out of the city...”

“Yeah, we’ve definitely improved from having to hide you in a basement fort” Dustin added in.

Eleven shook her head. “I did not escape. They let me go. We made a deal” A deal, Hopper had told her years back, was like a promise for adults. It was something that couldn’t be broken.

Dustin nodded. “Good. Because we aren’t going to let you go back”

Eleven smiled. She hadn’t had any other friends besides these three in her whole life. Papa wasn’t a friend. Eleanor was nice sometimes and Hopper was nice all of the time, but she didn’t really consider them to be friends either. During the nights after she had been made to do tasks she hated, it was the thought of these three friends that kept her sane.

They were such a huge part in her life and Eleven was terrified before, thinking that she wouldn’t be a big part in theirs. She had only been around them for a week: which she knew was a short time. And they had other friends they could make, other experiences they could have, more important people they could meet since they weren’t forced to live within the same four walls for the past eight years. But it seemed like they still cared about her despite that all.

“We thought about you too” Mike said to her softly, as though he could read her mind. “All the time these past years. We never forgot”

El nodded, smile growing wider, before she turned her head to look out the car window. A warmth filled her chest.

“I can’t believe we’re all back together again” Lucas said as he shook his head. “It’s like Luke and Han and Leia and Yoda all reunited”

Mike’s eyes didn’t leave Eleven, who was staring out of the car window in wonder. “Which one of us is Leia?”

“Dustin, obviously. He’s the pretty one”

“I’m okay with being the pretty one” Dustin conceded as they pulled up in the Big Buy parking lot. Eleven looked at the familiar store.

“I have been here before”

Mike and Dustin looked at each other, remembering seeing the cops as they biked past this place eight years ago. “Yeah, we know”

They all got out of the car and walked towards the front of the store where the carts were parked. There were a group of kids: middle school by the age of them, who were goofing around in the front. One of them sat in the back of a cart and ordered the others to push him into the store.

Eleven smiled at the kids, wondering if this was the kind of life she could have had if she hadn’t been forced back into the Lab all those years ago.

“You want to go in the cart?” Dustin asked, following the girl’s eyes. Eleven immediately shook her head.

“No. We are too old for that”

“You, Princess El of Hawkins Labs, are never too old for anything” Dustin declared grandly before he picked Eleven up princess style and dropped her into the back of one of the carts. Her legs were too long, hanging over the back, but the girl was ecstatic nevertheless.

Mike scowled at his friend, something a little rotten coursing through him, but the feeling disappeared at the sound of Eleven’s laughter. It was something he had never heard before and something he quickly realized he would give most anything to hear again.

“Okay now let’s go and get Lady Joyce’s list of treasures” Dustin continued on as he wheeled into the store, getting a few strange looks from people curious as to why there was a grown woman in the back of the cart. Those people were promptly ignored.

The boys made quick work of the shopping list. Being always-broke college kids, they were efficient and shrewd shoppers. They only stopped every now and then to show weird new things to Eleven. The girl was especially impressed by the new electric bread machine that had just started being displayed.

They went down the freezer aisle to grab the last of the things Joyce needed when all of the sudden Eleven started to kick the back of the basket, where her feet were dangling out. Dustin stopped the cart and all three boys looked at her as she leaned over the side, eyes wide.

“Is something wrong, El?” Mike asked.

Eleven shook her head, pointing to the glass case. “They come in chocolate now”

They followed her finger and saw the boxes of eggos stacked neatly in the freezer section. Lucas couldn’t hold in his chuckle.

“Yeah. You want to get some? They come in blueberry and buttermilk flavors now too” Mike explained.

“Chocolate” Eleven repeated.

Which is how they ended up coming back to Joyce’s place with everything on the list along with four boxes of chocolate chip eggos.

“She really loves eggos” Mike explained as he put them away in the Byers’ freezer.

“I can see that” Joyce laughed. She watched the boy put away the last box and close the freezer. “Mike..she’s okay, right? El? She... seems fine to you? Not still hurting or anything”

Mike looked over at the lady and saw the worry and fear in her eyes. He couldn’t blame her for it, especially after Will. So he just smiled at

her in what he hoped was a comforting way.

“She’s okay, Mrs. Byers”

“Okay...okay, good. That’s great”

The boys and Eleven all sat in the living room, catching up and teasing each other to no end as Joyce tried her hardest to make something edible for lunch. It really had been a long time since she cooked. Jonathan came home right as his mother was putting the food on the table. He had known that Eleven would be coming to stay, but having Will’s friends and a home-cooked lunch was more shocking to him than anything else. They all ate together, politely ignoring the over-salted dishes. To Eleven, it was all wonderful after the nutrient dense yet tasteless food that they had given her to eat back in the Labs and she ate seconds of everything, which made Joyce endlessly happy.

After lunch the boys and Eleven took the Byers’ dog on a long walk around the area. Like promised, Dustin showed El the place where Lucas had ‘ate it’: even magnanimously reenacting the moment of glory. Lucas loudly protested the whole thing. And Mike was mostly silent the entire time, just quietly taking in Eleven. Her laughter, the hair that flowed and fell to her back, the way she looked in his jacket: it was a different jacket and a different body wearing it, but she still looked the same. He still couldn’t believe she was back.

It was starting to become night when the boys finally decided to go back home. They promised Eleven to visit often during the remainder of their winter break. Dustin even did the spit swear, which had the poor girl in the bathroom, scrubbing at her hand for minutes after they left.

“Were they what you hoped they would be?” Joyce asked El as the girl came out of the bathroom. The boys had left and Jonathan was in his bedroom, getting clothes ready to go take a shower.

“They were” Eleven nodded. She felt more full and happy than she ever had before. “They are the same”

“Sometimes being the same is the best thing a person can be” Joyce said with a smile. “How about you go change into some sleep clothes and then you, me, and Jonathan can watch some TV or a movie for awhile. We can even have eggos for dinner”

Eleven did not need to be asked twice. She nodded her head eagerly and then went straight into her room...Will's old room. She turned on the lights and along with the normal room lights, hundreds of sparkling christmas lights twinkled from the ceiling. Eleven gasped as she looked up at them, feeling somehow immediately disoriented.

She was still wearing Mike's jacket and she closed it tighter around her, sliding to the floor as she took in the smell of cookies and flowers and laundry; lights shining rainbows of colors onto the floor and walls. The smell comforted her even as the lights left her feeling hollow inside.

She wondered what it was about the lights that reminded her so vividly of her not-so-wonderful past. And she thought back to Will... Will who wasn't here, who wasn't mentioned by anyone.

Wondered what exactly had happened to him in the years that she had been gone.

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Mike walked into his house and moved to take off his coat, only realizing then that he was still wearing Joyce's. He shook his head and he hung it up in the closet, making a mental reminder to return it to the lady the next day.

“Mike?”

He turned around and saw Amanda standing in the doorway and his heart sank. He had forgotten all about her! In all the excitement of seeing Eleven again, Mike had actually forgotten about his girlfriend's existence for a few hours. Maybe he had even wanted to forget about her.

“Are you okay? You came back late. Your mom called Mrs. Byers but she said you were out helping to walk the dog?”

There was nothing but concern in those pretty hazel eyes and Mike suddenly felt like the worst person in the world. He shuffled over to the girl and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, dropping a kiss into her golden hair.

“Yeah. An...old friend from middle school showed up and we spent some time catching up. Sorry I left you alone all day”

“It’s okay” Amanda waved off. “I got to spend some time with Holly. Taught her how to braid her hair. Plus, we can go out tomorrow right?”

Tomorrow him, Lucas, and Dustin had wanted to take Eleven around town and show her more of the shops. They had talked about it as they walked to their cars after dropping El and the dog back at the Byers’. He had really been looking forward to spending more time with the girl that had now reappeared in his life after all this time.

But instead, Mike just smiled at Amanda; the guilt crawling up his throat forcing him to say “Yeah, we can spend all day together tomorrow”

Notes for the Chapter:

The boys and El are finally together again, even if Mike is having trouble believing it! Luckily, Lucas has his back like a true best friend. More than any sort of budding romance, it's more important to me for El to make sure she still has her friends at this point. Plus seeing Caleb, Millie, and Gaten being more than adorable at the Emmy's yesterday has sort of fueled my need for more Dustin/Lucas/El friendship :)

Next chapter will have El meeting Amanda, figuring out what happened to Will, having brother-sister bonding time with Jonathan, and being part of an unexpected midnight ice cream date.

3. Losing My Religion

Summary for the Chapter:

In this chapter Eleven finds out more about Will, wonders about the awkwardness of her friends, meets Amanda, bonds with Jonathan, and eats ice cream at midnight

Loud knocking at the door and even louder dog barking was what woke Eleven up the next morning. Both Joyce and Jonathan had early shifts and had already left the house, leaving Eleven with what she had thought would be a few extra hours of sleep. It seemed whoever was knocking with increasing frequency had other thoughts.

She stumbled out of her room and down the hallway wearing a pair of Joyce's old pajamas, her hair a tangled mess. The dog immediately whimpered and crawled to her side as she approached the door. It seemed like the animal was already a bit attached to and protective of the new family member. It made Eleven happy. She always had loved animals.

Eleven reached down to pat the scraggy dog on the head as she opened the door, revealing Dustin and Lucas, both fully dressed and beaming.

“Morning, El” Dustin sang out. He was wearing a navy blue sweater with reindeers stitched all over it and a furry trapper hat. “Your hair is looking extra wonderful today”

Eleven’s hands immediately flew up to her messy hair, already used

to Dustin's sarcasm. Her cheeks heated and she wondered if she really should have woken up earlier to get dressed properly...

Lucas punched the other boy in the side. "Your hair looks fine, El"

"I wasn't joking!" Dustin defended "your hair is actually cute like that"

Eleven felt her cheeks heat up further. "What are two doing here?"

"We told you yesterday that we wanted to take you around and show you some of the shops in town so...here we are." Lucas explained.

"Yeah" Dustin added on "We thought we could show you the store where Jonathan works. It's a really cool electronics shop next to that old fashioned ice cream parlor"

Eleven's head perked up "Ice cream?"

Lucas grinned. "You want ice cream? It's the middle of winter"

"Ice cream tastes the same in the winter" Eleven said with a shrug. The two boys looked at each other before laughing. Well, there really wasn't any way to argue with that type of straightforward logic.

“Come inside and wait while I get ready” Eleven said as she opened the door wider. Both of the boys walked in. Dustin bent down to pet the dog who just whined and clung to Eleven’s legs, following the girl as she started to walk down the hallway.

“That’s no fair! I’ve known Molly for 10 years and she’s ignoring me for you”

“It’s no surprise, dogs are excellent judges of character” Lucas drolled, earning him a kick to the back of his knees. Eleven tried not to show how secretly happy she was that Molly had chosen her. She even let the dog go into the room and hop up on the bed, something that she knew probably wasn’t allowed seeing as how Jonathan kept pushing Molly off the sofa the day before.

She quickly put on a sweater, another pair of pants that were a bit too short for her, and Mike’s jacket before rushing to the bathroom where she brushed her teeth and ran a comb through her hair a few times. Joyce had told the girl that she was welcome to use any of her makeup and showed her where it was all stored in a box next to the sink, but Eleven didn’t even know where to start with anything so she left it unused for the time being.

Dustin and Lucas were tinkering with the old Atari in the living room when Eleven came out with Molly hot on her heels.

“Still wearing Mike’s jacket?” Lucas asked, eyebrows raised, as the girl came into the living room.

Eleven looked down at the bright blue coat. “He left it here

yesterday. And I like it. It smells safe”

“Be sure to not say those kind of things around him” Dustin whistled as they left the house. Eleven took the key from under the welcome mat, where Joyce said it would be, to lock up behind them.

“Why?”

“Because you’re going to confuse the poor boy more than he already is right now”

Eleven had no idea what Dustin was talking about or what Mike would be confused about. But Lucas was nodding his head in agreement so she figured that it was something she probably should know about as well. She didn’t want to look ignorant: it was a lesson that Eleanor had taught her when she was 16 ‘*You’re too old to be asking so many questions, Project Eleven*’ so she decided to just go with a neutral question.

“Where is Mike?”

“He had...other plans” Lucas answered, remembering the slightly awkward phone call they had with their friend that morning before coming over the the Byers. “Has a guest over that he needs to entertain”

Eleven just nodded, trying not to be bothered by Mike’s absence. She appreciated Dustin and Lucas spending time with her, but it

somehow didn't feel right without Mike there. She just chalked it up to the fact that the group didn't feel the same with one missing. It had always been the four of them.

They all piled into Lucas' car, Dustin even gallantly offering Eleven the front seat, before heading off towards the town center.

"We should come around here at night sometime before they take all the Christmas decorations down. The lights look amazing" Lucas commented, nodding towards the rows of lampposts with lights twirled around them.

Eleven thought of her room back in the Byers' house and had to stop herself from shuddering. She wondered again what had happened to Will but didn't know if it was the right time or place to bring it up. One of the repercussions of growing up without much human interaction was that Eleven was now unsure of how to read situations. She had read books and watched movies (when Eleanor was in a good mood) enough to know more about basic manners and scenarios than she had at age 12, but she was still unsure of herself most of the time. Dustin and Lucas had just only just reentered her life and Eleven didn't want to scare them away with any ill-timed questions.

So, as always, she stayed quiet and nodded her head eagerly as the two boys pointed out various places that they found funny or interesting.

Hawkins still looked the same as the glimpses Eleven had gotten of it 8 years back. The buildings were all small, old, close together, with cheery window front displays. Since it was only a couple of days after Christmas, there were a plethora of reindeers and fat bearded Santas

waving from weathering storefronts. The ground was covered with old snow that gathered in greying clumps near the sidewalks and froze to the branches of the trees. It wasn't exactly the picturesque Christmas town from movies, but it was real and Eleven thought she liked this much better.

"Jonathan gets to see all the new things coming out before anyone else since he works in the shop" Lucas explained eagerly as they parked in a lot near the electronics store. "He calls us whenever they get something he thinks we'd like"

"Yeah, he's kind of like the group older brother" Dustin added "Just like old times. It's nice"

Lucas nodded. "He's technically your older brother now too, isn't he? Since you're living with the Byers"

Eleven hadn't really thought of that before. Nobody in the labs had been like family to her, not even Papa, so she wasn't exactly used to making family where she lived. And now that she was an adult, she hadn't really expected to be given a family either. But the thought of having Joyce as a mother and Jonathan as an older brother wasn't a bad one.

"If he wants to be" she answered as they started towards the store.

"Of course he wants to be. Jonathan is a good guy" Lucas said quickly. "He helped out so much with Will and even moved back to Hawkins after everything happened to be here for his mom"

And this time Eleven couldn't stop herself.

"What happened to Will? He is not here..."

Lucas and Dustin looked at each other. They had been talking about Will without even realizing that the girl had no idea what had happened in the past 8 years that she had been gone. It wasn't really easy to bring up the past, especially when it came to their friend. They had all worried about Will more than enough to last a lifetime and they weren't even close to being done yet.

"Will...he's sick" Lucas said, a bit hesitant. Dustin took over for him.

"He's been sick ever since he came back from the Upside Down. We didn't notice it for a long time because he was pretty good at hiding it. But it started to really mess with him a couple of years ago. He... he thought he would see the monster all the time. Which is impossible since you killed it..."

Eleven stayed silent, not wanting to tell the boys that she hadn't...the monster, like her, was still alive. Still in the Upside Down and most likely still weak without having been nursed back to health like she was, but alive nonetheless.

"It got too bad eventually" Lucas finished. "He's in Pennhurst now. It's a hospital in Kerley County. He thinks they can help him"

“You don’t think they can help him?” Eleven asked.

“They haven’t really been able to do much for him but we have to keep trying, you know?”

Eleven nodded. Pennhurst. She knew that name. “That is where you thought that I was from. The first night we met”

Lucas chuckled, a little sheepishly. “Oh wow, you remember that. I was stupid back then, you don’t need to remember anything I said. Pennhurst isn’t a bad place, it’s just....Will doesn’t belong there. He’s not crazy”

“He’s not crazy. He’s *sick*” Dustin said emphatically “Just no one knows how to help him”

Eleven thought maybe she could. She had been the only one of them other than Will who had spent time in the Upside Down. She had flew—dismembered and disoriented—with the monster to the realm where she had laid, broken, until the people from the Labs had brought her back. She thought if anyone could understand Will, maybe it would be her. And if anyone could understand her, maybe it would be Will.

But before she could think more about it, they had reached the storefront. Dustin opened the door for the other two and they went into the shop. Immediately, Eleven was taken aback by the amount of electronics blaring around her. There were a wall of televisions, all turned to different channels, and another wall had an impressive display of personal home computers.

“There are bigger stores like Circuit City out there, but this place is really cool for Hawkins” Lucas explained. “I’m trying to save up for a home computer right now. How cool would that be?”

“Very cool” Eleven answered, not quite knowing what the purpose of a home computer was. The computers back in the Lab had been anything but cool.

“Hey there boys!”

The three kids turned around to see a young man smiling at them from behind the counter. “You guys looking for Jonathan?”

“Yeah. He’s working today, right?” Lucas asked.

The boy nodded, looking at Eleven. “New friend? From college?”

“Nah, El is an old friend. Just came back to Hawkins after spending some time away” Dustin answered, placing his arm around the girl’s shoulders casually.

The boy behind the counter whistled. “Hawkins does have a way of making you come back. Everyone tries to escape it but can’t. Besides that Wheeler girl. She seems to have made it out pretty good. Speaking of that, where’s Mike? Haven’t seen him around lately”

“Mike’s been busy. You know...*company*” Lucas answered.

“Yeah, Amanda right? Who would have thought little Wheeler had it in him to land such a pretty girl”

Both Lucas and Dustin found themselves immediately looking at Eleven, who was thankfully too enthralled by the display of gameboys near the front counter to really be paying attention to anything.

“Jonathan is in the back near the walkmen, like always” the boy at the counter continued, pointing towards the music section. “When you see him remind him that he has stocking duties today, okay?”

“Sure thing” Dustin said, arm still on Eleven’s shoulders as he led them both to the back. Lucas followed, mumbling something about busybodies who talked too much for their own good. Jonathan was stacking different walkmen systems in order of color, nodding his head along to the music playing from a nearby stereo when he saw the kids coming towards him.

“Hey, you three. What are you doing here?”

“Wanted to show El the things in here” Lucas answered “plus just wanted to show her where you worked in case she wanted to come mess with you some time”

“I would not do that” Eleven said quickly, still a little insecure about

her relationship with Jonathan.

The older boy just laughed. “Nah, don’t worry. You can come bug me anytime. It gets boring here”

“On the topic of boring, Kevin said that you have stocking duties” Dustin said. Jonathan groaned and looked towards the top of the shelf where a heavy box of walkmen that needed to be unpacked was stacked.

“Guess I should go get the ladder, then”

Eleven looked around the shop. It was still pretty early in the morning and they were the only ones here besides the boy behind the counter in the front who was now fully engrossed in a program playing on one of the many televisions. Not using her powers was the first and most important rule that Eleanor had given her but she was eager to help out anyway that she could. And it wasn’t like the boys didn’t know about what she could do.

So slowly, Eleven looked up at the box and with a quick flick of the head it flew off the shelf and landed gently on the ground by their feet.

“Still so cool” Dustin breathed out.

“I actually forgot that you had powers” Jonathan said sheepishly and for some reason, that made Eleven the happiest out of anything that

had been said to her since she came back to Hawkins.

“Hey, your nose isn’t bleeding” Lucas pointed out.

“I can do a lot more without getting tired now” Eleven answered simply, not really wanting to get into details about the years of training and what she had to do during them. The government’s main goal when they first got her back was to raise her stamina in preparation for the many different projects that they had for her to do.

Dustin just nodded, accepting the answer without any problem. “Makes sense since you’re older now. Hey, do you think you can make these cassettes dance? Like just wiggle them in the air or something?”

“Dustin, you can’t just ask her to...”

“We can for sure pick up a pair here. And then you can drive around and try to find Dustin, it won’t take long. Hawkins is tiny”

The boys and Eleven looked towards the front of the store where two people had walked in, talking loudly.

“Oh shit” Dustin said as him and Lucas automatically tried to stand in front of Eleven. The girl fussed, leaning over Lucas’ side in order to see what was going on.

Mike was there and with him was a girl that Eleven had never seen before. She was short with pretty blonde hair; but that was all Eleven really got to see before Lucas and Dustin started to have a small panic session.

“What is he doing here...with *her*? ”

“How am I supposed to know! He just said that they were going to spending time together today, I never thought he’d bring her here! I mean, an electronics store isn’t exactly a place of romance, no offense Jonathan”

“Why would I be offended by that?”

“Lucas! Dustin!” the pretty girl cried out and both boys turned to her with awkward smiles on their faces.

“Shit, shit, shit, shit” Dustin whispered through his teeth. Eleven still didn’t know why everyone was acting so strangely, but even Mike looked like he wanted to shrivel up and die when he caught site of his two friends and Eleven standing in the back of the store.

“Hi, Amanda” both boys chorused, still trying to keep Eleven behind them. It didn’t really work well since the girl was about as tall as Lucas and could easily poke her head out around him.

“What a coincidence” Amanda laughed, and Eleven noticed she had a very pretty voice as well. “We were just about to go looking for you, Dustin. But my earphones broke before we left the house so I wanted to get a replacement pair...”

“Looking for me?”

“Yeah, your mom called our place and asked where you were. Your parents apparently haven’t seen you at all this break” Mike answered, walking up next to the petite girl. Eleven thought that his voice sounded a little funny.

Dustin scoffed. “They’ve seen me plenty. Mom just likes to hog up all my time”

“Moms tend to do that” Amanda answered, craning her head a little to look at the girl that was standing behind Mike’s friends. “I don’t believe we’ve met before?”

All the boys looked at each other with wide eyes as Lucas and Dustin took minuscule steps to the side, allowing the tiniest peak of Eleven to be seen. Eleven huffed and pushed her way through the boys, finally getting a good look at the girl in front of her.

Amanda was quite a bit shorter than her and had golden hair that hung to her shoulder in waves. She was wearing a soft blue dress with grey tights underneath. All of the sudden, Eleven became a bit self conscious of the baggy sweater and too-short pants she had on, as well as the dull hair that refused to do anything but hang stiff and straight.

“This is El” Mike said in a rush. “She’s the old friend I was telling you about. She...moved...away in middle school and just came back to Hawkins yesterday”

“Nice to meet you, I’m Amanda” the girl said with a bright smile.
“Where did you move to before?”

Eleven racked her brain, trying to think of a place other than Hawkins and coming up mostly blank. Then she remembered a very similar conversation that she had gone through 8 years ago.

“Sweden” she said without any hesitation. Dustin and Mike bit down on their lips to prevent from laughing and Lucas hid his chuckle behind a cough.

“She’s happy to be back. It’s freezing there” Dustin added with a straight face.

“Sub-zero, I’ve heard” Mike drolled.

“Well Indiana isn’t exactly the warmest place in the world either” Amanda commented, not picking up on anything strange “but surely warmer than Sweden. You have to tell me all about it one day! I’ve always wanted to travel abroad and...wait...is that Mike’s jacket?”

The boys all looked at the jacket Eleven was wearing and then back

at each other, wondering what in the world to say. Of course they could just tell her the truth that Mike had given it to her, but then they'd have to explain why Eleven didn't have her own jacket in the first place and...

"Yeah, I let her borrow it yesterday" Mike answered with a slightly nervous chuckle. "The airlines lost all her luggage"

"Oh no, that's too bad! It's crazy how they can do something like that"

"Yeah" Mike chuckled. Jonathan just watched the whole thing unfold, truthfully a bit enthralled with the show of awkwardness that was going on in front of him. It had been a long time since he had been so entertained. But he did take pity on all of the kids so he decided to help save the situation a bit.

"Amanda, if you want to follow me, I can show you where all our earphones are" he said as he led the girl away from the group. As soon as the two of them were out of hearing range, the boys let out a huge sigh.

"How awkward" Dustin said.

Eleven looked at the boys and frowned. "Why is it awkward?"

Mike glared at his two friends. "Nothing is awkward, El, don't worry. These two losers here just don't know how to interact with people so

they make everything weird”

Dustin clutched at his chest in mock hurt. “Oh wow, *losers*. You’re really cutting us deep with that one, Wheeler”

“Don’t you have to get home, Henderson? You don’t want to neglect your parents anymore than you already have”

“Well, Lucas is my ride” Dustin answered, looking towards his friend. Dustin was the only one of them who didn’t have his own car. He had gotten his license at the same time as the other two and had even gotten a job over the summers to save up for a car but he kept finding better things to spend his money on instead. And once him and Lucas had decided to go to the same college together, it made mooching rides off his friend even easier.

“We told El we’d take her to get ice cream” Lucas pointed out.

Mike drew his eyebrows together. “It’s 12 degrees outside right now”

“The girl wants ice cream, what can we do?” Dustin answered. “Do you think you could take her instead?”

“I can’t. Amanda has the whole day planned out and I promised to take her everywhere to make up for ditching her” Mike said in a rush. Lucas just shrugged and turned to Eleven.

“We’ll have to take a rain check on the ice cream then, El”

Eleven just looked at the boy, confused and not really sure if she should know what ‘taking a rain check’ meant. Mike saw the confusion on her face and smiled gently at her.

“We’ll get ice cream together later” he explained. Eleven tried to not let the disappointment show on her face. She liked having the boys around...and she really did want to get ice cream. But she knew that they had lives beyond her.

“Okay. Later”

Mike frowned at the girl’s soft tone but just then Amanda and Jonathan came back with a pair of new headphones. Dustin and Lucas said their goodbyes to the group, making sure Jonathan could take Eleven home after his shift, before heading out. Amanda just grabbed Mike’s arm, saying her own goodbye to Eleven as she dragged him to the cash register.

“Having Wheeler-related heartbreak must run in our little makeshift family, huh?” Jonathan mused as he watched Amanda talking animatedly to Mike.

“Heartbreak?” Eleven asked.

“Yeah, I’m sure it must be awkward for you to be meeting Mike’s girlfriend”

Girlfriend. So that was what Amanda was. Eleven knew what a girlfriend was—she knew all about it, actually, even though people might not expect it of her. Hopper had sent her magazines every now and then along with the monthly eggos. They were girly, teeny things that Eleanor always passed to her with a roll of her eyes but Eleven had treasured them more than anything else. And from them she had learned about girlfriends, boyfriends, crushes, love, and tips on how to dress like the hottest pop stars: not that she really had any use for that last one.

“It’s not awkward” Eleven said, wondering why all the boys thought that her meeting Amanda was awkward. Were boys just naturally awkward around ‘girlfriends’? She would have to research that more.

“It isn’t?” Jonathan asked. “From the way the boys always talked about you and how Mike acted when you disappeared, well...I guess...I don’t know. We always just kind of assumed that you and him had something together”

Something together. Eleven didn’t know if that was true or not. She had learned about kissing from the magazines, and realized that was what Mike had done with her back in the cafeteria of the middle school what felt like lifetimes ago. Maybe it could have led to something more, but that was something they would never figure out now. And Eleven didn’t even know if she wanted that ‘something more’ now that she was free again.

Mike was her friend: probably her best friend, the one that was always the nicest to her and who never broke his promises. All she knew was that she wanted him in her life. She couldn’t tell anything beyond that.

“It was a long time ago”

“Yeah, it was” Jonathan agreed with a wistful look on his own face. And Eleven thought about what he said with both of them having Wheeler heartbreak.

“Did you have something together with Nancy?” she asked.

Jonathan looked at the girl in surprise, his mind automatically going back to the day before he graduated from NYU: the last, dramatic conversation in the rain. The way the rain had fallen down and soaked them to the bone, the way the droplets looked as they collected and bunched in Nancy's coffee colored hair.

“It was a long time ago” he echoed.

Eleven smiled. “We are quite the pair”

And at that, Jonathan couldn't help himself from smiling either, feeling a little warmth for the first time in awhile. “Yeah, we really are. Want to come help me with the stock out back? The quicker we finish this, the quicker we can go home”

The two of them spent the rest of the morning and afternoon unloading boxes from shelves, Eleven helping out in her own way once they made sure the door was securely closed. Jonathan talked to

her about all sorts of things, his favorite topic being music. In the span of a couple of hours Eleven had learned all about Nirvana, Pearl Jam, R.E.M and Soundgarden. The girl was like a sponge, eager to soak up any information that came her way and Jonathan was a patient and willing teacher.

The two of them made fast work of the stock and were able to leave early. Jonathan took Eleven out to a diner for burgers to thank her for her help, even taking time to explain to her what everything on the menu was, much to the girl's embarrassment. Eleven just ended up ordering two baskets of fries and a milkshake, all of which she happily consumed under Jonathan's disbelieving eyes.

The rest of the day was pretty uneventful. The small, makeshift family all spent time together, politely eating a semi-inedible dinner courtesy of Joyce and then both mother and son had a blast trying to teach Eleven how to use the Atari. By the time they all went to their own bedrooms for the night, they were properly tired.

Eleven changed into her pajamas, this time picking out a pair of fleecy pants and a short sleeved shirt with a faded cat on the front. She thought the selection of pajamas were definitely the best of all the clothes that Joyce had to offer her.

She was just about to slip into bed when there was a loud tap on her window: like someone had thrown a rock at it. Immediately, Eleven's heart leaped in panic. What if someone in the Lab had learned that she used her powers earlier and was now there to take her back? She cautiously got out of bed and walked over to the window, ready for whatever was on the other side. She could handle herself: she knew it. She fought with countless people from the Lab before, fought the Demogorgon, fought wars. Whatever was on the other side of the window could be dealt with.

As slowly as she could, Eleven lifted the curtain and peered outside. A familiar face looked back at her. All the breath she had been holding let itself out in a large, relieved heave as she opened the window and stuck her head out.

“Mike?”

The boy was standing outside wearing a sheepish grin a heavy coat: holding a plastic bag in his hands.

“Hey El! I hope I didn’t wake you up. I...do you have time to come out?” he raised the bag “I brought ice cream”

Eleven just stared at the boy for a few second before nodding her head. She closed the window softly and walked out of her room as quietly as possible, trying not to wake Joyce or Jonathan up. She took Mike’s jacket off the hanger by the door and slipped it on over her pajamas before going outside. Mike was waiting for her on the porch still wearing that same, sheepish grin.

“I really didn’t wake you up, right?”

“I was awake” Eleven answered.

Mike shuffled in place “That’s good. I was starting to think this was a bad idea and I was stupid, but I had already snuck out and brought

ice cream and stood out in the cold like an idiot so I thought I might as well go ahead with it”

Eleven stood there, wondering what was going on.

“You just looked disappointed earlier when we told you that we couldn’t get ice cream with you” Mike explained. “So...I thought we could have some now”

“Now?”

“Yeah. I brought whatever we had at home. It’s not the same as going out, I know, but....it’s chocolate?”

Eleven’s eyes immediately lit up, causing Mike to laugh. He took the gallon out of the bag, along with two spoons. They both sat down on the porch steps while Mike opened up the carton and brandished the spoons with a dramatic flourish. He handed one to Eleven, who joyfully dug in. She couldn’t remember the last time she had ice cream.

“I can’t believe you want to eat this stuff when it’s this cold outside”

“I can’t?”

“No, of course you can. It’s just...different”

Eleven nodded, spoon in her mouth and lovely chocolate ice cream melting on her tongue. “I am different”

“Yeah, well I’m here eating ice cream with you so I guess I’m different too” Mike said, digging his own spoon into the carton. “I’m sorry I couldn’t spend a lot of time with you today. I know that you just came back and everything is probably super crazy for you and I wish that I could be there to help you out more...”

“It’s okay, Mike” Eleven answered, picking up on the boy’s guilt. Guilt was the last thing that she wanted any of her friends to feel, especially towards her. Though there were many things that were the same about her from eight years ago, there were a lot of things that were different too and she hoped that the boys noticed it. She wasn’t the same helpless and completely clueless girl that she once had been. “I...have grown up a lot. If anything bad happens, I can help myself”

“I know you can. But you’re back here with us, we’re a group again. And friends don’t let other friends deal with things alone”

“Sometimes you have to deal with things alone...”

“Not anymore” Mike said emphatically. “Don’t feel like you have to be alone, okay? I’m here for you now. You can call me anytime, Joyce has my number she can give to you.”

“And Dustin and Lucas too?”

“Yeah, Dustin and Lucas too. But I’m the most important one” Mike said with a grin.

Eleven nodded around the spoon. “Okay. I will call you sometimes then, when I want to talk. It’s nice spending time with you. It feels... warm”

Mike’s cheeks, already ruddy from the cold air blowing, turned even redder. “Yeah?”

“Yeah”

“Yeah...I agree. It feels warm”

Eleven took another spoon of ice cream before asking Mike what he had done during the day. The boy immediately went on an excited tangent about going to visit his old high school, most of which Eleven tuned out. She instead concentrated on the way her and Mike’s knees would knock together every so often, the way their spoons would accidentally tinker against each other when they went to scoop out ice cream at the same time.

She thought about how strangely empty it had felt with only Dustin and Lucas earlier, but how normal it felt when it was just the two of them like this. How this was Mike, her first friend, the one that was always the most patient with her and that brought her ice cream in winter at midnight even though he thought it was weird.

She wondered if this is what ‘*something together*’ felt like.

“It’s getting late isn’t it? You look tired” Mike asked, bringing Eleven back to conscious thought.

“No, it’s okay” she answered quickly, but Mike was already closing the carton of ice cream. He laughed loudly as the girl stuck her spoon in right before he could shut the lid, getting in a last mouthful which she ate with a grin.

“I hope I didn’t just get you sick. It’s freezing out here and you’re not even properly dressed for the cold...”

“Don’t worry. I have excellent health” Eleven answered, licking the last remnants of chocolate off the spoon.

Mike wished that he was more like Dustin in that moment, able to say something funny and suave. Or more like Lucas, who always seemed to know the right things to say in any situation. But he was just Mike Wheeler, perpetually awkward and hopeless. So he just put the ice cream carton back in the bag and smiled at the girl in front of him. Eleven’s cheeks were red from the cold and she looked extra dwarfed in his old jacket: her hair flying into her face in a ruffled, adorable mess.

“I’ll be going back home, then”

“Can we meet again tomorrow?” Eleven asked quickly, before remembering that Mike had other obligations. Namely his girlfriend.
“At night if you are busy during the day is okay”

“You...you want to meet again tomorrow?”

Eleven looked a little confused. “Why would I not?”

Mike shrugged as if the girl had just asked him some sort of impossible question. “Yeah, okay. Tomorrow then”

Eleven smiled. “Tomorrow”. She watched as Mike started to walk away, waving an awkward goodbye to her as he went down the path to where he parked his car: far enough away that the noise of it turning on wouldn’t bother the residents of the Byers’ house. She got up and dusted off her pants before going back into the house. The spoon that Mike had brought was still clutched in her hands and she didn’t know what to do with it so she just slipped it into her jacket pocket. At this rate, she’d soon have a whole collection of Mike’s things that he forgot to take back from her.

Eleven entered the house and closed the door behind her as softly as she could.

“You have fun?”

Jumping, the girl turned around to see Jonathan sitting on the living room sofa, grinning at her. She smiled back guiltily.

“Did we wake you up?”

“Nah, I got up to use the bathroom and heard you two talking outside” Jonathan said with a wave of his hand. He leaned forward and looked at Eleven with raised eyebrows. “Still trying to tell me that you two don’t have anything together?”

“Mike is a friend” Eleven said. It would have been defensive had it been anyone else saying the words. But Eleven’s words were carefully thought out. Her and Mike were friends. Anything more than that was something that the girl didn’t want to think about.

“He’s a good friend” Jonathan agreed as he got up and started to walk towards his room now that he was sure that Eleven was safely back inside and not going to freeze to death. “Just be careful, okay? No person is ever worth breaking your heart over”

Eleven could sense that Jonathan was speaking from experience so she just nodded her head. But she trusted Mike. He was her best friend and he wouldn’t do anything to hurt her.

At least she hoped not.

Notes for the Chapter:

So here is the third chapter! For only being back 2

days, Eleven has had quite an eventful run in Hawkins! But this chapter was mostly a chance to bring Will into the picture (he's definitely going to have a large part in this story) and also hint to the coming Jonathan/Nancy arc. Plus, I just really love Eleven and Jonathan bonding; the poor girl deserves an awesome older brother. And of course I also love midnight ice cream dates because...well who doesn't?

Next chapter will have fireworks, news years shenanigans, a not-so-surprise visit from Nancy, and Eleven learning what a New Years Kiss is.

4. Come As You Are

Summary for the Chapter:

In this chapter Eleven discovers the joys of sparklers, meets Nancy, contemplates jobs, and experiences her first New Years Kiss

Whenever Mike envisioned himself having an existential crisis it was usually accompanied by a dramatic location and an even more dramatic soundtrack. Ride of the Valkyries playing as he stood on the precipice of a cliff, for example. He definitely never imagined it happening in a sleepy backyard in Hawkins, but there he was watching Eleven scale a tree in the Byers' backyard as he contemplated what his life had become and all the choices and miscreations that had led him to this place in time.

“Okay, how fast was it this time?”

Eleven’s voice shook him out of his stupor and he looked up at the girl who was looking back down at him with an eager expression on her face.

“Sorry, El, I forgot to keep time”

The girl sighed and leaned back against the tree trunk and Mike couldn’t help but chuckle at the slight pout that adorned her face. Hanging out with Eleven during the day was uncommon. Normally the girl went to work with Jonathan in the morning—taking a quick liking to the electronics shop—or hung out with Dustin and Lucas when they could get away from their parents. Sometimes Mike would

join them for a little while, but most of his and El's meetings happened on the porch of the Byers' house after everyone else was asleep. There they would sit on the steps or take a walk in the woods nearby, talking about whatever came to their minds.

Today was different, however. Tomorrow was New Years Eve and Amanda would be busy helping Mike's mother prepare for the annual Wheeler New Years party that happened every year, so Mike had found himself hurrying over to the Byers' house to catch El before she left to go to work with Jonathan.

"How can I know if I am healthy enough to pass the physical?" Eleven continued, pouting even deeper.

"It's a physical to work in an electronics store, El. It's not going to be that hard to pass, trust me. They probably just want to make sure you can lift boxes" Mike answered with a smile. Eleven had gotten it in her head that she wanted to get a job just like Jonathan and Joyce. "Are you sure that you even want to work in that place anyways?"

"It's an okay place" Eleven said, hesitating a little and dropping her voice "but I do not really like Kevin" she shuddered at the thought of Jonathan's loud and much too inquisitive co-worker.

Mike frowned. "Yeah, don't get close to him. He's creepy"

Eleven leaned forward, her legs dangling off either side of the branch she was sitting on. "Do you think I can get a job at some other place?"

“Of course you can! You can get a job doing whatever you like to do”

“I...” Eleven hesitated, not knowing if she should admit what was on her mind. But Mike was looking up at her with those eyes that were always so gentle, that made her feel she wouldn’t be judged “I do not really know what I like to do”

“Oh” Mike said, feeling like the biggest idiot for not realizing that of course a girl who had lived in a lab her whole life wouldn’t exactly be brimming with career ideas “Well, you have all the time in the world to try out different things that you like”

“Is it sad? That I am this old and do not even know what I enjoy doing”

Mike glared up at the girl “Hey, don’t say that kind of shit about yourself. Nothing about you is sad. And besides, no one our age knows what they want to do”

“Not even you?”

Mike shrugged. “I like computers. I’m doing a programming degree, but I don’t really know what kind of job I want in the future or if I’ll even still like computers then. So you don’t have to worry at all about this kind of thing”

Eleven nodded and leaned back once again, feeling much more relaxed. If even Mike didn't know what he wanted to do then maybe it was okay for her not to know either. She could ask Joyce later on what types of jobs there even were in Hawkins for her to try out.

"By the way" Mike said, bringing Eleven's attention back to him. "Nancy is coming home today so you can meet her again. Do you remember her?"

Eleven wanted to laugh. Everything about that week eight years ago was crystal clear in her memories. They were the only happy memories she had ever had before now. "I remember her. Why is she coming?"

"Well, tomorrow is New Years Eve. My parents always throw a huge party, you'll be there since Mrs. Byers comes every year anyways. So Nancy is coming home from Chicago for it"

"Does Jonathan know she is coming?"

"Jonathan?" Mike asked, confused. As far as he knew, his sister and Jonathan never talked after high school "Why would he know?"

Eleven knew that Jonathan didn't really like to talk about Nancy: he always changed the subject whenever their conversations veered too close to the topic of the girl. So she thought that maybe whatever had happened with them was a secret, like the kind she learned from the magazines. If that was the case, she would keep the secret for him.

“I just thought they were friends. They seemed close before”

“Well Nancy went to college in Chicago and Jonathan was in New York...they’re really far away from each other” Mike added on, not sure if Eleven even knew what cities he was talking about “so I think they lost contact”

“You did not lose contact with Dustin and Lucas” Eleven pointed out.

“Yeah, that’s different, though. Plus we all stayed in Indiana”

“Did you not want to go to different places like Nancy and Jonathan did?”

“No...not really” Mike said, sounding a little hesitant. Eleven thought that maybe he had secrets of his own that he kept to himself. But she also knew deep down that the reason the boys had all stayed in Indiana was most likely the same reason that Jonathan had moved back to Hawkins: to be close to Will.

And Eleven once again felt that strange feeling in the pit of her stomach that she got whenever she thought of Will. She had never met him in this realm before, but for some reason she felt a pull towards him. It was as though they were connected for some reason.

“You should get down from that tree” Mike said up at her and Eleven nodded with a smile, shimmying down the trunk just as easily as she had gone up it. Though she had no experience with climbing trees, it

seemed like all the physical training that they had her do in the labs payed off.

“Eight seconds. I think you might have set a new record” Mike said, impressed, as he showed Eleven the numbers on his watch. “It used to take Lucas a few minutes to get down this tree back when we played on it as kids”

“But I am taller than Lucas was as a kid” Eleven pointed out.

Mike nodded. “Yeah, you’re really tall for a girl”

Eleven felt her cheeks and ears heat up, once again becoming a bit self-conscious about her height, which she was quickly learning wasn’t very feminine. She towered over most other women she met and was mostly on par with the males.

“Not that it’s a bad thing!” Mike added quickly, stumbling over his words. “It’s good. I mean...it’s good on you. You look good tall. You’d probably look good short too, but this works great for you!”

Eleven chuckled at the boy’s panicked gestures and hurried words.

“Why do I always feel like I’m embarrassing myself when I talk to you” Mike groaned, his cheeks bright red.

“You don’t” Eleven said simply and Mike knew it was the truth.

It was actually one of the reasons why he liked talking to and spending time with the girl. Eleven had always been the only person he knew wouldn't judge him for anything. He could show his awkwardness, his stubbornness, his impatience, his clumsiness and she would accept it all without thinking any less of him. To be able to go through life having a friend like that by his side was invaluable and he knew it well.

"Jonathan is going to come home soon" Eleven said as she caught the numbers on Mike's watch again. It was past noon already.

"Yeah, he will be. Should you head on home then?"

"I *am* home" Eleven pointed out, gesturing to the house that was right in front of them. Mike felt himself turn into a tomato all over again.

"That you are. I guess...I...should be the one to go home." Mike said as they both started walking towards the front of the house. They could hear Molly barking from the inside as they walked past a window and the boy almost rolled his eyes, amused by how attached the dog had gotten to Eleven.

"I'll see you tomorrow at the party, then" Mike said once they reached the front porch. Eleven nodded and smiled widely, excited by both the prospect of spending more time with Mike and going to her first real party.

“Do...we have to bring anything?” Eleven asked, remembering everything she had read about parties in the magazines.

“Don’t worry about that” Mike said with a laugh. “Mrs. Byers will take care of it”

“Okay” Eleven answered happily “See you tomorrow”

“Yeah, see you tomorrow” Mike said as he watched Eleven go back inside the house. The door closed behind her softly and he let out a deep exhale, feeling exhausted for some reason. The weird mix of guilt and frustration that had been his life for the past week came back and hit him at full force.

He didn’t know if he should feel guilt, but he couldn’t help himself. Because here he was with a girlfriend back at home yet he was still rushing to the Byers’ every free second he had and sneaking out of the house every night like some sort of teen. He justified it to himself by saying that it was because Eleven had just come back and she needed attention more than Amanda, but even he and all his awkwardness with women knew that he shouldn’t be more eager to spend time with another girl over his girlfriend.

He wasn’t being fair to Amanda—the girl who had been nothing but a wonderful part of his life for almost two years now—and he knew that. But he thought back to what Eleven had said the first night he had come over with ice cream. Spending time with her felt warm. And it had been a long time since he had felt warm.

Mike wasn’t quite sure what he wanted from Eleven, and he knew for

a fact that the girl wasn't sure what she wanted from anything or anyone. The rational part of him told him that it was the stupidest idea to throw away Amanda for the shadow of a possibility to explore something with a girl who he had really only known for a couple of weeks, one of which had been eight years ago.

And Mike, above all else, was a rational man.

So he walked away from the Byers' house, confused and conflicted, but still not motivated enough to change the status quo. Him and El being friends was good for right now. It was safe and it was comfortable, and those were two things that Mike cherished.

Back in the house, Eleven had no idea about the conflicting feelings that were plaguing her friend. Her mind was only on one thing...the shower.

Eleven loved the shower more than anything else in the house. She could (and did) spend hours at a time in the bathroom with the lights off, sitting in the tub and letting the stream fall over her, soaking in the hot water and warm steam that billowed throughout the room.

It was so different from anything that she had been exposed to back in the labs. The salt from the sensory deprivation tanks and the harsh chemicals that they gave her to use in the stiff, sterile shower stalls had left her skin feeling dry and broken at the end of every day. So the chance to just relax in a cloud of enveloping steam was a little slice of heaven.

Eleven had hopped in the shower almost as soon as she had gotten

back in the house, relaxing at the feeling of the water spray hitting her as she sat in the tub.

She heard the front door open and then, a few minutes later, the door to Jonathan's room close. It seemed like the older boy was back home from his shift at the store.

The house was silent for a little while longer until the familiar sound of Jonathan's stereo starting up seeped through the wall into the bathroom. His selection for the day, like most days, seemed to be Nirvana. Eleven had gotten quite familiar with the band's music in the week that she had been living with the Byers: Jonathan was an avid fan of grunge and she absorbed that from him.

The opening bars of *Smells like Teen Spirit* sounded from the boy's room. Eleven drummed her fingers to the beat against the rim of the tub, singing along when the first line of the chorus rolled through.

"With the lights out, it's less dangerous"

If that could be her motto, it would be. She knew her love of the dark was probably unusual for a person with her background, but she always felt the safest without the lights on. The dark had meant she didn't have to do any more tasks in the Lab for the day; the dark was when she met Mike, Dustin, and Lucas for the first time. The dark was long, comforting showers; taking walks in the woods and eating ice cream with Mike; snuggling under the covers of Will's old bed.

It was another thing about her that she knew was probably odd and un-feminine, but she didn't care. The dark was safe.

When the front door opened for the second time, signaling Joyce's return home, Eleven decided that it was probably time that she got out of the shower. She dried herself quickly and put on the pair of pajamas she had brought with her before exiting the bathroom in a billow of steam.

"Had a good shower?" Joyce asked, poking her head out from the kitchen to look at the girl.

Eleven nodded as she made her way over to the older woman.
"Showers are always good"

"Yes, and you have to be the cleanest person in all of Hawkins with all the showers you take"

"Is it bad?" Eleven asked, a little uncertain, as she entered the kitchen. Joyce was looking through the fridge with a slight frown on her face. She turned around to give the girl a side hug.

"Not at all. Sowhat did you get up to today?"

"Mike came over"

"Oh?" Joyce asked, eyebrows raised and the hint of a smile spreading over her lips "It's nice of him to come over during the day for once"

Eleven looked at her with wide eyes and Joyce laughed loudly. “You thought I didn’t know?”

“We always tried to be quiet”

“Mike drives a car, baby girl. So it’s hard to miss him coming or leaving somedays”

Eleven blushed deeply. “I’m sorry”

“No, don’t be. My boys never snuck out of the house as teenagers, so it’s kind of fun to have the experience of being a worrying mom now” Joyce said with a grin. She wanted to ask Eleven what happened during these nighttime outings, but she also didn’t want to make the girl feel even more embarrassed than she was now. Plus she knew that it wouldn’t be anything worth worrying over. Mike had a girlfriend and beyond that was one of the most responsible kids that she knew.

“What did you and Mike talk about when he came over today?” Joyce asked instead.

“Jobs” Eleven answered, trying to will away the heat from her cheeks.

“Jobs? Are you wanting to get a job?”

“Yes”

Joyce frowned a little bit. “Why such a hurry? You just came back and you should take your time to get to know the town more and just enjoy being out”

“I spend time with Jonathan at his job every day now. And Dustin told me that him, Lucas, and Mike will be going back to college soon so I will be too bored at home by myself” Eleven answered. She didn’t know what to do with free time, never having much of it before.

“That’s true” Joyce agreed. “It would probably be good for you to get out of the house and meet some new people. Make some girl friends, maybe”

Eleven wasn’t sure what the difference between boy friends and girl friends would be and she also wasn’t sure if she wanted more friends than what she had, but she nodded her head anyways.

“I’ll ask around some people in the store and see if they know of any job openings around town” Joyce said, placing a comforting hand on Eleven’s shoulder. “Just make sure you don’t feel rushed into anything, okay? You can take all the time you want to do something like find a job”

“Okay” Eleven agreed as Jonathan came out of his room and walked into the kitchen. He was still fully dressed and wearing a jacket.

“Hey El, go get dressed. We can go out and get some fire crackers for the party tomorrow...and pick up some dinner” he added, giving his mother a sly look. Joyce let out a relieved sigh.

“Fire crackers?” Eleven asked.

“Yeah, they’re...well they’re basically sticks of fire. Everyone sets them off during New Years”

“That sounds dangerous”

Jonathan snorted. “True, but we all spend way too much money on them every year anyways. Now go get ready, I’ll start up the car so the heater gets going”

Eleven took time to pick out an extra warm outfit, piling her still wet hair on top of her head before going out to the car to join Jonathan. As the boy pulled out of the driveway and started down the path that led away from the house, Eleven wondered if she should mention the fact that Nancy was back in Hawkins. From the way Mike had reacted, she didn’t know if Jonathan and Nancy still talked these days and she didn’t want him to be surprised when they showed up at the Wheeler house the next day.

“Do you go the New Years party every year?” she asked instead, trying to scope out if Jonathan and Nancy meeting was something that happened every year around this time.

“No, this is the first one I’m going to in...hell, five years, I guess” Jonathan answered “There wasn’t a lot of money to come back for the holidays when I was in college and last year I was working”

“The shop is open at night on New Years?”

“No, I just started working at the electronics shop a few months ago as a second job. I’m the forensic photographer for police department, but there really isn’t that much work most of the time.”

“That is a good thing” Eleven pointed out. “The police department has to work on New Years?”

“They work every day of the year if they’re needed”

“So will Hopper not come to the party tomorrow?”

“No idea” Jonathan answered “Mrs. Wheeler does invite him every year mostly because Mike asks her to, but he usually doesn’t come”

Eleven noted that she needed to ask Joyce for Hopper’s number once they got back home. She wanted him there for the party too. Through all his packages over the years, Eleven felt like she had spent every holiday with Hopper so it was only fitting that they spent this one together too.

“Are you excited about the party?” Jonathan asked.

Eleven bit her bottom lip. “Maybe. It sounds like there will be a lot of people there”

“There will” the boy answered. He looked over at Eleven before removing one of his hands from the steering wheel and placing it on the girl’s arm. “If you get overwhelmed, come and find me okay? I don’t mind having to leave the party early if you get uncomfortable”

Eleven smiled at Jonathan. “Okay. You too. I will leave early with you if you get uncomfortable”

“Why would I get uncomfortable?”

“Nancy will be there” Eleven said, looking closely at Jonathan’s face. There was something that flashed through the boy’s eyes, but his expression stayed neutral.

“It’s fine” he said “I have to meet her again someday”

“You don’t have to do anything that you do not want to do”

Jonathan chuckled at the girl’s words, remembering something very similar that he had said to Will years before. Eleven wasn’t biologically related to him and hadn’t even been around for that long, but she really did already feel like a natural part of the family.

“You’re right, I don’t. But I want to see her again. It’s been a long time. You don’t need to worry about me and Nancy”

Eleven knew she would still worry, so she didn’t say anything. She knew this was one of the main points about friendship: worrying about each other. It did feel nice even if it made her heart feel like it was burning.

The fireworks stand managed to distract Eleven, who was amazed over the selection that was available to them and captivated by the drawings of explosions and sparkles on the front of all the packages. They bought probably way too many sparklers and crackers which Joyce rolled her eyes at when they presented them to her after getting home.

But Eleven’s excitement was contagious, even over the phone, which Hopper found out as he somehow managed to be sweet talked into attending the Wheeler’s New Years party.

The girl’s excitement lasted up until the next day, a few hours before they were supposed to be headed towards the Wheeler’s house. Her and Joyce were standing in front of the woman’s closet: inspecting the contents inside.

“We really should have gone out clothes shopping for you” Joyce said, guiltily “Work has been so crazy lately that I keep forgetting and...I’m really sorry. You have to keep wearing my old clothes, even to parties”

“I like your clothes” Eleven said, and it wasn’t exactly a lie. She

didn't mind wearing Joyce's old clothes at all, she just wished that they were a little bit longer. It always make her feel oversized when she slipped into the older lady's too-small outfits. She knew the outfit she wore to the party would also be too small like most everything else she had been wearing and she hoped that would be okay.

"I think this dress might be okay" Joyce said, taking out a midnight blue babydoll dress. She had gotten it for herself a few years back but never worn it because it hit her a little too long and also it wasn't like she had a lot of occasions to wear dresses anyways. "It's going to be short on you, but you can just wear some tights on underneath it"

"Okay" Eleven breathed, feeling the pretty blue material of the dress with a smile.

"I...I can do your hair for you too, if you want" Joyce offered. "It would look so nice up in some braids. If you don't mind, that is"

"You can do it"

"Great!" Joyce said as she led the girl to go sit on the bed. "Don't tell my boys this, but when I was pregnant with Will I had hoped that I would be having a girl. I've always wanted a daughter. If I do too much, don't be afraid to tell me. Jonathan always tells me that I come off as too strong sometimes..."

"It's okay" Eleven said quietly. "I...have always wanted a mother too"

Joyce's hands stopped in the girl's hair for a moment, thinking back to Terry Ives. Eleven deserved to know all about the mother that she did have out there, to get a chance to know her and maybe help her heal. But...Joyce thought that maybe she could enjoy the feeling of having a daughter for a bit longer. So, a little selfishly, she just smiled and continued to braid Eleven's hair with care.

A couple of hours later they were standing in front of the Wheelers' house with a bag full of fire crackers and a cake (store bought in a hurry after Joyce disastrously tried to bake her own earlier in the day). Jonathan was wearing a simple pair of black pants and a grey button down, his ever-present camera hung around his neck with a leather strap. Eleven's dress really was too short on her, but luckily Joyce had been able to find a pair of black tights that fit the girl. Her hair was brushed away from her face and tied in a series of criss-crossed braids at the nape of her neck. Both of them just stood by the door.

"What's up with you two?" Joyce laughed at the kids. "You would think we're marching to our deaths or something. Let's go in"

The Byers walked into the house and immediately were inundated with a whole crowd of people. There were the Hendersons and Sinclairs, people from Ted's work, Karen's book club, and the families Holly's elementary friends. Every room was decorated impeccably in shades of black and gold and the scent of food mixed with the sounds of conversations and overwhelmed Eleven in a way that she didn't even know she could be.

Eleven had grown up in isolation and now the friends that she did have were loners themselves and tended to just stick to one another. Sure she had seen lots of people walking along downtown from the window of cars or the electronics shop, but she had never

encountered this many people in this close of quarters and it made it her feel suffocated: much like when Papa used to lock her up in tiny rooms.

She felt her throat start to close before a comforting arm wrapped itself around her shoulder and brought her into a warm embrace.

“Hey, breathe” Jonathan’s voice was low and gentle and exactly what Eleven needed at the moment. She fisted her hands by her sides and squeezed her eyes shut, letting the comforting darkness come over her for a few seconds.

“You okay?”

She nodded into Jonathan’s shoulder, trying to stave off the memories of that tiny room and the choked feelings it gave her. “Just not used to this many people”

“We can leave if you want”

“No, it’s okay. I will be fine”

“Okay” Jonathan said as he tightened his arm around her “Just take your time and breathe a little”

Right at that moment, Nancy and Mike both came down the stairs: Nancy in a pretty green dress and Mike with a matching vest,

courtesy of their mother. They were discussing the best ways to avoid Karen's eyesight for the rest of the night when they stumbled upon the scene of Jonathan and Eleven hugging next to the front door.

Mike's mouth dropped open. Though Eleven's face was in Jonathan's shoulder, he immediately recognized the tall, reedy figure: her legs looking forever long in her dress and her hair pushed away from her face in a series of braids. He didn't know why the two of them were hugging in the doorway, but it made his stomach feel like it was falling down to the ground.

Nancy, on the other hand, had no idea of who the tall girl Jonathan was hugging was and she saw a bit of red. She couldn't help but feel affronted by the whole scene because just a year ago it had been her standing in the rain, leaving her whole soul out in the open only to be rejected. And now it seemed Jonathan had found a girl worth pursuing.

"What the hell is going on?" Nancy whispered through her teeth.

"Nothing good" Mike growled out. His sister turned to him in confusion.

"Wait, why are *you* upset about this?"

"I'm not upset! Do I seem upset? I'm not. Why...why are you upset?"

Nancy shook her head. "Don't try to put this back on me, Mike

Wheeler, you sound like you're two seconds away from murdering someone”

“You...I...what...no...”

“Nancy?”

Both Wheeler children turned their heads to Jonathan, who had now detached himself from Eleven and was all but staring at Nancy. Neither of them had really changed physically in the past year, but it felt like they were seeing each other again for the first time in a decade.

“Hello Jonathan” Nancy said, a little stiffly, as she turned to look at the girl who he had just been embracing seconds before. There was something oddly familiar about her: the slope of her upturned nose, the eyes that were a little too large amidst delicate features, the slightly insecure hunch of her body.

“Is that...”

Mike stepped forward and smiled a little sheepishly at his sister.
“Nancy, you remember Eleven, right?”

Nancy's eyes widened as she swiveled her head from the girl to Mike and then back to the girl, trying to process the information that she had just been given.

“Eleven?”

Eleven nodded, a whisper of a smile on her face. Nancy looked the same in her eyes: still just as pretty with her curled hair and big smile.

Nancy gasped and smiled widely at the girl. “You’re back, oh my god, the boys must have been ecstatic! Oh, you should have seen Mike after you di...left...back then. He was going crazy...”

“*Nancy*”

“Well you were, don’t even deny it! When did you get back, Eleven?”

“A week ago” Eleven answered, turning towards Jonathan who nodded at her “I am living with Joyce and Jonathan”

“Yep. We’ve got a new Byers on our hands now” Jonathan agreed, before turning to Mike. “Hey, it’s a little crowded in here. Do you have a quieter place to go to?”

Mike saw the clear hint in the older boy’s words paired with the tension of Eleven’s ramrod posture and still-clenched fists. He immediately realized what the hug earlier had been about and relaxed a fraction.

“Yeah! El...Dustin and Lucas are outside in the backyard. My dad built a huge fire in the pit out here. Come on, I’ll show you”

Eleven turned to Jonathan. “Is it okay?”

“Of course, go spend time with your friends”

“But...” she tried not to let her eyes trail to Nancy, even though it was obvious what she was worried about. Jonathan smiled and ruffled the girl’s carefully styled hair a little bit.

“I told you that you didn’t need to worry about me. Go and have fun, El”

The girl nodded and left with Mike. Jonathan watched as they both walked away, eyes narrowed. For a guy with a girlfriend and who said he only wanted to be friends, Jonathan didn’t feel like Mike was acting very friendly. He needed to have a talk with that kid...

“Wow, I can’t believe that Eleven is back. How long has it been since we thought she died?” Nancy wondered out loud.

Jonathan swallowed. “Eight years”

“Eight years” Nancy echoed “That was really forever ago. She’s become so grown up now”

“I guess we all have”

Awkward silence fell upon both of them as they slowly realized that they were alone together for the first time in a while. Neither knew what to say to each other. Their last conversation had been that fateful confrontation back in New York. The day after that, Jonathan had been on a plane to Hawkins while Nancy left for Chicago, both of them with their own broken hearts.

“How has Hawkins been?” Nancy finally asked.

“Good. The same”

She nodded, not knowing what to do with herself. “And your mom?”

Jonathan’s eyes turned soft and Nancy had to stop herself from letting it affect her. Jonathan’s love for his family had always been one of the things she loved best about him. “Mom is doing a lot better now. Having El around has really helped her”

“Yeah. All three of the boys seemed happier too when I saw them, I guess I know why now. Having her back will be good”

“It will” Jonathan agreed as they lapsed into silence once more.
“So...how is Chicago?”

Nancy's whole face lit up. "Chicago is great. Classes are tough but I knew what I was getting myself into when I applied to med school so it's okay. Mom and dad got me a new place this year and it's really nice"

Jonathan smiled as he saw the obvious happiness on Nancy's face. This was what he had always wanted for her. Nancy was going places: she was going to be great and Jonathan wanted her to reach everything he knew she could.

"I'm really happy to hear that, Nancy"

The dreaded silence came back and Nancy almost groaned out of frustration. She knew that they wouldn't go back to being friendly like before, but this sort of awkwardness was something that she hated. It had been hard for her to make friends or get close to new people after what had happened to Barb, so she mourned the loss of one of the few friendships that she did have: once again kicking herself for making that trip out to New York the year before.

"I...guess...I should go and see if mom needs any help" Nancy said finally, motioning towards the party that was rollicking around the rest of the house.

"Yeah, of course" Jonathan said quickly. He pointed at the camera around his neck "I should be taking pictures of everything for your parents too"

Nancy nodded and left the foyer as quickly as she could. She sped past the kitchen, looking inside briefly and noticing that Joyce and

Chief Hopper were in the middle of some sort of deep discussion. She thought that was a little weird, but tonight had already proved to be one weird occurrence after another.

“Oh Nancy, there you are!” Karen said, rushing over to her daughter. “Can you come over here and help me get more cups from the garage?”

“Yeah” Nancy said, taking one last look at Joyce and the Chief before going over to help her mother. She wondered what in the world they could be talking about.

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“She wants to what?”

“To get a job” Joyce said, fingers itching for a cigarette. She had given them up years ago, but sometimes she wanted one just so she could have something to do with her fingers. “She asked me yesterday about getting one”

Hopper frowned. “If it’s about money then you guys don’t have to worry. I can help out with...”

“We don’t need help with money” Joyce said quickly. “This isn’t about money, Hop. She’s a young girl that doesn’t want to be stuck in our house all day. You can’t really blame her for that”

Hopper couldn't argue with that. After being stuck in a lab for her whole life, he would imagine that Eleven wasn't so eager to be stuck in a house now. He had to remind himself that the little girl was a grown up now and needed to be allowed to be a grown up.

"She'll need to get some form of identification before she can apply anywhere, though" Joyce continued.

Hopper cursed under his breath, loud enough for Joyce to hear it but still quiet enough that everyone else who was milling about the kitchen wouldn't be bothered by it.

"I'm sure if you ask the people in the Labs they can give you something..."

"No, that's the problem. They did give me her identification papers" Hopper said with a sigh. Joyce looked at him in confusion. If Eleven had her papers, then what was wrong?

"They all have her birth name on them. Jane Ives" Hopper continued and Joyce's eyes grew wide in understanding. She leaned back against the counter and nodded her head. She had known this talk would be coming soon anyways, even if it was one she really didn't want to have.

"I guess we're going to have to have a conversation with El about who her real mother is..."

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Outside in the backyard, Eleven was once again blissfully unaware of the tensions boiling inside of the house. She was standing in between Dustin and Lucas, who were in the middle of teaching her how to properly roast a marshmallow: arguing with each other as much as they were instructing her.

“You have to wait for the marshmallow to cool down for a little bit before eating” Lucas sighed as Dustin give him a look of disgust.

“What kind of monster are you? Everyone knows that it’s best to eat it when it’s piping hot and gooey”

“Yeah, that’s why you get it all over your face all the time like some kind of savage. No wonder no one wants to give you a New Years kiss”

Eleven’s interest was piqued with that term. “New Years kiss?”

“Yeah” Lucas explained as he waited for his marshmallow to cool a little “It’s a tradition. You’re supposed to kiss someone you love to welcome in the New Years. Start the year off with something good, I guess”

Eleven nodded thoughtfully. Someone you love. “Like a boyfriend or

girlfriend?”

“Yeah, normally. You can kiss a friend too I guess” Lucas answered, looking over at Dustin who had both cheeks stuffed. “But don’t you dare think about kissing Dustin, he’s too disgusting for a proper lady such as yourself”

Dustin said something that sounded maybe like ‘fuck you, Sinclair’ but his mouth was too full for them to really make it out clearly.

Eleven instead turned her head to look for Mike and found him standing by the door to the backyard, speaking to a couple of older people who were probably his parents’ friends. Amanda was standing next to him with her arm wrapped around his waist. Eleven couldn’t help but think that they looked very nice together.

“Hey, don’t worry about those two” Dustin said, finally swallowing down the mass of gooey sugar and following Eleven’s eyes. “You don’t want to share your New Years kiss with Mike anyways. He’s a terrible kisser”

Eleven’s eyebrows rose. “How do you know that?”

“I won’t admit that there might have been a few traumatizing kisses that happened during spin the bottle back in high school but...”

“Trust me, it was more traumatizing for the rest of us” Lucas shuddered.

Dustin looked over at Eleven “There were a few exchange students who didn’t know how lame we were so we...”

“We?” Lucas scoffed.

“Okay, I proposed a game of spin the bottle with them. It’s basically a kissing game. Turns out we have terrible luck, though, since us boys mostly just ended up kissing each other”

“Worst night of my life” Lucas sighed.

Dustin held up his hands. “Hey, nothing wrong with kissing another dude”

“Yeah, but there’s something wrong with kissing *you*”

“What are you kids talking about?” Mike asked as he and Amanda came over with a box of sparklers. Dustin immediately took them and looked through the box.

“They were telling me about how all of you kissed each other in high school” Eleven said simply.

Mike turned the most fierce shade of red as Amanda raised her eyebrows at him, clearly amused.

"You boys did what now?"

"It was a spin the bottle misadventure" Lucas explained. "Terribly embarrassing since it was all of ours first kisses, right?"

Mike looked adamantly at a spot on the ground, trying his hardest not to make any sort of eye contact with Eleven at all. "Haha, yeah... first kiss"

"It's so cute how innocent all of you boys were" Amanda laughed, turning towards Eleven. "They got lucky that a pretty girl like you wanted to be friends with them in middle school, huh?"

Eleven felt herself heat from her toes to the tip of her head. This was the first time any one had called her pretty since she had come back. She had never really thought her face was pretty before and she certainly didn't feel pretty with her too-short dress and troublesome hair, but hearing the words still made her happy.

"I was not that pretty then" she said a little shyly.

"Don't say that" Mike said quickly, trying as always to build the girl back up to what she deserved. "You were pretty...cool. Super cool, especially to us bunch of nerds"

"El was definitely too cool for us" Dustin agreed as he took some of the sparklers out of the box. "Are these for us?"

“Yeah” Mike answered. “Not all of them, though, they’re for all the guests. The countdown is going to start soon”

Nancy stepped out into the backyard and looked around, catching sight of her brother and Amanda near the boys and Eleven. She observed them all for a moment, smiling a little as her brother subconsciously shuffled to the side whenever Amanda came too close to him, his eyes never leaving Eleven’s smiling face. Dustin said something that made Eleven laugh and Mike’s whole face just melted at the sound.

Nancy rolled her eyes. It seemed like being hopeless in love was something that ran in the family.

“Mike, you need to pass the sparklers out to everyone” she called out.

“Okay mom” Mike cried right back and Nancy shook her head at him as he and Amanda took the box back from Dustin and left the group, heading back towards the house. She watched her brother and his girlfriend walk past her and refrained herself from saying anything. After all, she wasn’t really the best person to be giving relationship advice to anyone. Steve, once upon a time, had told her that relationships would only last if they were meant to. So she would just have to wait and see what the future had in store for her little brother.

“Why is Nancy staring at Mike and Amanda like that?” Lucas asked as he watched his friend walk back into the house.

“No idea, maybe they’re fighting” Dustin said: too engrossed with separating their sparklers into three separate piles to really be paying much attention to anything else.

“Both her and Mike seem weird today” Lucas continued, shrugging.

“Who’s weird today?”

The three kids turned to see Jonathan walking up to them. He had a couple of sparklers of his own in his hand and was twirling them around his fingers with surprising dexterity.

“Nancy and Mike” Lucas answered “Do they seem weird to you to?”

“Mike is always weird” Jonathan said with a grin. Especially now that Eleven was back, the poor boy was weirder than ever. As for Nancy...Jonathan didn’t really know what to say. This was supposed to be a time to let go of past problems and walk into the new year without worries, but there was just too much tension between everyone. He had known that their relationship would change forever at that day last year, but he hadn’t known the depth of what the awkwardness would be. He cringed even thinking about it.

So instead, Jonathan took the camera off his neck. “Mind if I get a few shots of you kids?”

“Hell yeah!” Lucas said as he grabbed Dustin and placed Eleven in between them. “We never got any pictures of us and El before”

“Make sure you send us one once you get them developed” Dustin said after Jonathan snapped the picture. “Lucas and I can put it up at our apartment in Notre Dame”

“I’ll get them developed tomorrow so I can give them to you before you head back” the older boy said the group of people from the inside started to make their way out into the backyard. A couple of lighters were passed around and soon, most of the sparklers were lit up.

Eleven’s eyes grew wide as the sparks surrounded them, illuminating the inky night sky. They looked like something that should be magic, a lot like the things that she had read about in the fairy tale books back in the Lab’s small library. She immediately felt like she was a little kid again, experiencing some sort of fantasy world. The crowd of people that was increasingly growing larger couldn’t even dampen the atmosphere for her.

“They’re cool, right?” Dustin asked, smiling widely at the excited expression on the girl’s face

“Very cool!”

Dustin, Lucas, and Jonathan just all looked at each other, each one of them taking delight in Eleven’s joy. One of the best feelings in the world was seeing someone you care about experiencing a much-loved tradition for the first time.

Jonathan was in the process of lighting Eleven's sparkler when Ted and Karen came out to join the crowd in the backyard. Ted stood in front of everyone and tapped a knife to his champagne glass, bringing the crowd's attention to him.

"It's almost midnight so I just wanted to say a few things about 1991. It was a good year. Business went well, everyone was healthy. The Cold War ended..."

Eleven stiffened a little at those words. She didn't like to be reminded of the war and her own personal involvement in it. She wondered if the people around her would be cheering if they knew what it took to end the war, what she had to do to make sure that it ended in the way that everyone in the Lab said it needed to. *Joy requires sacrifice* Eleanor had told her. But none of the people here knew exactly what sacrifices were made for their joy...

"El, the countdown is about to begin!" Lucas cried, bringing her out of her thoughts. She looked up to see that Ted had already finished whatever his speech was and that the people in the crowd were looking around: staring at their watches.

Everyone's sparklers were lit and Eleven twirled hers a little, all thoughts of the war leaving her head as the sparks danced and burned bright in the air around her hand.

"Okay, here we go!" Dustin said as he looked at his watch. Everyone started counting at once.

"10! 9! 8! 7! 6!"

Eleven looked up in delight. Through the light and smoke of all the sparklers going off around her, she saw Mike standing on the other side of the yard. Their eyes: hazy, smoky, a little blinded, met and Eleven felt a slight pressure in her chest. Mike didn't take his eyes off of her.

“5! 4! 3! 2! 1!”

“HAPPY NEW YEARS” Everyone yelled. Eleven tore her eyes away from Mike just in time to be clobbered by the group of boys.

Dustin kissed one of her cheeks, Lucas the other, while Jonathan placed a quick peck on the top of her head. Eleven laughed loudly, gripping onto the three pairs of arms around her.

The air was heavy with the scent of smoke, sparklers shone all around them, drunken yells and celebration sounded loudly, and in that one moment in time, Eleven had never felt so loved.

Notes for the Chapter:

haha I know a lot of you were expecting El's New Years kiss to be with Mike and I was tempted, but I really do love building up her friendships with the rest of the boys as much as I like building up her budding relationship with Mike. However, I did put in a bit of a Mileven moment right before since I am trash for them and can't help myself

I was also excited to bring Nancy into the story finally. Her and Jonathan's backstory will be explained in more detail in future chapters, but for now you can all enjoy their cute tension.

The next chapter will have an awkward breakfast with the Byers and Wheelers, a talk with Eleven about Terry Ives, the boys going back to college, and Eleven coming up with a plan to finally go and meet Will.

5. Under the Bridge

Summary for the Chapter:

This chapter we have the most awkward slumber party known to man, El and Holly forming an unlikely friendship, Hopper and Joyce talking to El, and the boys leaving for college

The party at the Wheelers started to wind down by 1. By that time, most people who had been drinking earlier in the night were beginning to sober up enough to make the trip home and started to leave in a steady stream. The Sinclairs and Hendersons said their goodbyes as they dragged away their respective sons: both of who were raiding the Wheeler's pantry to try to find other foods they could teach El to cook over the fire. Marshmallows, hot dogs, and apples had all been roaring successes and the boys had promised to take El camping with them one day when it got warmer.

By the time the party was officially over it was too late for either Joyce or Jonathan to drive back. They all knew it would be like that and the Wheelers had planned for it in advance. Even though both of them knew that it was technically safe, neither Byers liked to drive in the woods near their house too late at night. And nobody would push them after everything they had been through.

The path that the kids had dubbed Mirkwood so many years ago had too many bad memories. To the Byers it was where Will's bike had been discovered that cold November morning 8 years back; the path where Jonathan and Joyce had embraced, crying and confused, when the body was pulled from the lake; the path where Will would disappear to late at night for years without anyone knowing; the place where they had found him 2 years ago half frozen and nearly dead after one of his panic attacks.

Karen knew from previous years that Joyce would not be comfortable driving back home so late and assumed that Jonathan wouldn't as well so she gathered the Byers and her children in the family room after the last guest had left. She looked at all the tired faces, including the new girl that was now apparently living with the Byers. Joyce had told her that El was a relative that had moved to Hawkins after being gone for a long time and Mike and his friends seemed to know the girl very well, so Karen accepted her into the fold with little hesitation.

"I've planned out sleeping arrangements for tonight" Karen said to the little group. "Joyce, you can have the guest room on the first floor. Jonathan, if you don't mind, you can bunk with Mike for tonight. Nancy will sleep in Holly's room and Amanda and El can share Nancy's room"

Mike immediately choked on air, making waving motions with his hands. "Amanda and El don't even know each other, though. Nancy can sleep with Amanda"

"Do Holly and El know each other?" Karen asked, a little confused at the proposed switch.

"Maybe El can sleep with Mrs. Byers in the guest room?" Nancy offered, trying to help her little brother out a bit. Mike shot her a thankful look.

"You're overreacting too much, Mike" Amanda laughed tiredly. "It's just one night, I don't have any problem sharing a bed with El."

Had Amanda been more awake, she would have noticed how visibly awkward not only Mike but also Nancy, Jonathan, and Joyce were. Still a little high on adrenaline from a successful party, the tension in the room was not lost on Karen. The woman couldn't help but wonder what the issue was with her arrangements and was about to suggest that they actually could switch rooms when Eleven spoke up.

"It is fine" the sleepiness in her brain was making her revert back to her slightly unnatural speech pattern that she had been trying so hard over the past week to correct "I can sleep with Amanda"

"Are you sure?" both Mike and Jonathan asked at the same time, worry evident in their voices to the point where even half-asleep Amanda picked up on it.

Joyce watched the whole exchange with interest. She was not worried about Eleven: in fact, it was almost the opposite. Eleven was a strong girl without a mean bone in her body; there wouldn't be much in the way of tension between her and Amanda. But seeing how concerned her son and Mike were over the girl made her heart happy. She knew that Eleven would never have to worry about being alone or unloved again.

"I am sure. It is late so everyone should just go to bed quickly"

"Okay" Jonathan said. "If you say so. Let's all get some sleep" Mike looked like he wanted to protest again, but the older boy put a hand on his shoulder and led him away from the family room where everyone was slowly starting to disperse.

“I don’t want her to feel uncomfortable” Mike whispered as the two boys climbed the stairs.

“Eleven is an adult now, Mike. If she says that she’s going to be fine then we need to respect that. You’re just going to make her angry if you keep on treating her like a kid”

“You don’t know her! She won’t complain about anything if she thinks that it would inconvenience us so she needs someone to look out for her”

“You think I won’t look out for her?” Jonathan asked, eyebrows raised as Mike opened the door to his room and they both went inside. “You’re not the only one that cares about El. But you’ve got to know that there’s a difference between stopping her from doing something dangerous and then trying to keep her away from anything that might be uncomfortable. You can’t protect her from everything.”

Mike looked at the ground. He knew that Jonathan was right. It probably bordered on insulting treating El like the kid he remembered instead of the woman that she was now. Well, even that wasn’t true because the kid he remembered had been way more than capable of taking care of herself.

Mike knew that at the root of everything was his need to not let Eleven down again. He felt that all he ever did was let her down. Back when they were kids she saved his life twice and all he had left her with in return was some broken promises. And now that they were adults, Mike couldn’t help but feel he was constantly letting her

down by just being the awkward, faulty person that he was. He knew that Dustin and Lucas would rag on him for being so self-conscious, but he couldn't help it, especially when it came to Eleven.

He knew that the girl could do so much better than him with the friends she chose: someone smart and levelheaded like Lucas or someone charming and funny like Dustin. Even someone calming and understanding like Will. Mike was nothing like that, yet Eleven wanted to be around him nevertheless and it caused him a sort of anxiety that he couldn't explain.

Jonathan watched the boy in front of him. The parade of expressions that went across Mike's face was clear to see and he stopped himself from saying anything about it. He had been planning on having the 'figure out what you want before you hurt Eleven' talk with the younger boy, but he could see that Mike was probably the one who was beating himself up the most about the whole situation.

As the defacto leader of his little circle of friends, Mike had always taken on everything the hardest. He had been most affected when Eleven had disappeared 8 years ago, had taken it the worst when Will slowly wasted away in front of their eyes. He was eager to not let anyone down but at the same time was always certain that he would. His inability to save Eleven all those years back had almost completely wrecked his self-esteem and Jonathan wouldn't be the one who hurt it even further.

So instead he just shook his head and said "El just came back so I know it's a confusing time for you. Just...trust her and her judgements. She trusts you more than anyone else, you know? So she deserves your trust in return"

“I will. I do trust her” Mike answered, looking up at Jonathan with the hint of a smile. “Besides, she’s better at taking care of herself than any of us”

“Can’t argue with that” Jonathan agreed. The two boys started at the task of making a bed on the floor out of the blankets that Karen had already set up near the dresser. Once everything was made, Jonathan changed into a pair of Mike’s pajamas. Both boys were nearly the same height, with Mike being a bit taller, and the Jonathan was once again struck with the realization of how grown up they all were now. Gone were the puny little kids that would spend all day playing Dungeons and Dragons in the basement. He slipped underneath the blanket.

“Can I ask you to do something?”

Mike, who was in the process of turning off the light on the bedside table, turned and looked at the older boy. “Yeah?”

“Don’t come by our house at night anymore. I know you’re not doing anything bad, but...you’ve got to know that it’s not right”

Mike blushed deeply in the dark. “It’s...I’m not trying to...I...”

“I know” Jonathan said. “I’m not telling you to do anything or break up with Amanda and go after El. Definitely don’t do that. El needs time to figure out what and who she wants, if she even wants anything romantic in the first place. It’s way too soon for something like that. But it’s not fair for anyone involved for you to be sneaking around with her either”

“Yeah” Mike conceded. “I know. I’ll stop. It’s just...been confusing, you know?”

“I get it” Jonathan answered. “But that’s something that you’ve got to deal with on your own. Don’t bring El into it”

“I won’t” Mike said emphatically. They both lay there in silence for a few minutes, letting the darkness of the room lull them to sleep. Jonathan was just about to drift off when Mike’s soft voice flitted through the room once more. “Will and El are lucky to have you as a big brother. We all are”

The older boy didn’t say anything, but he felt his chest compress with the weight of the words. It was the best start to a New Years that he could have asked for.

One door down in Nancy’s room, Eleven and Amanda were getting ready for bed in their own way. Karen had also left out a set of sheets for them but Amanda had waved them off, saying that there was plenty of space on the bed for them both. Eleven had never shared a bed with someone else before but the thought of it was kind of exciting. It would be just like the sleepovers that girls talked about all the time in the magazines.

“I’m so tired I’m about to collapse” Amanda said, a bit dramatically, after the girls had changed into pajamas “please don’t mind if I snore”

Eleven nodded sleepily. She got into the bed and her pajama shirt: one of Nancy's old ones, rode up. Amanda giggled a little.

"Even the pajamas are too short for you. I'm totally jealous that you're so tall. You're the same height as Lucas, right? 5'9?"

Eleven didn't know how tall Lucas was and didn't even know how tall she was. The people in the Labs had been obsessed with her height: they took her measurements every week and would add things into her food to experiment with their effects on her. *Gene modification* they had called it the few times she payed enough attention to catch anything. She knew she probably shouldn't have tuned them out so much, but after awhile all the experiments started to bleed together and she had to ignore them to keep her sanity.

"Yes, Lucas and I are the same height"

"So lucky" Amanda sighed. "Well, I heard that Swedish people are a lot taller than Americans anyways so I guess it's nothing special for you. I must look like a midget compared to everyone you know back home, huh?"

Eleven wasn't sure how to answer so she just nodded and lay down, letting the countless pillows on the bed cocoon her. She let out a pleased sigh. "This is nice"

"Isn't it? I've been enjoying these pillows so much that I'm convinced I need to buy at least five more for my bed back in the dorm"

Eleven looked over at the other girl. “You have been sleeping in Nancy’s room?”

“Sure” Amanda said “Nancy only came back home yesterday so I’ve been staying here the rest of the nights. Did you think I was staying in the guest room?”

“I thought you would sleep with Mike”

Amanda turned 10 shades of red in the matter of a few seconds.
“Wow, they sure move faster in Sweden, huh?”

“Move faster?”

“I mean staying in the same room when you go to visit the parents for the first time. It’s not really appropri...well, it’s not really done here much” Amanda explained in a rush, cheeks aflame “Plus, me and Mike don’t exactly have that kind of relationship yet, you know?”

Eleven didn’t know. “No?”

“Nothing like that at all. Mike’s not really interested. I don’t know. It’s like sometimes...aish, I shouldn’t be talking to you about this kind of stuff. You’re his childhood friend and all, I don’t want to make you feel awkward and in the middle of things”

“You can say anything” Eleven answered quickly. “I can keep secrets well”

“Well, sometimes I feel like he’s in love with someone else. He doesn’t even look at other girls, so it’s stupid for me to think that way but...a couple of months after I met Mike, Lucas told me that there was this girl that Mike liked when they were younger but she passed away. The *lost love of his life* or something like that”

“Oh” Eleven said. This time it was her who’s cheeks heated up. Unless the boys had another friend who disappeared: which she doubted they did, it was obvious who Lucas was talking about.

“It’s totally stupid of me, right? To be jealous of some dead girl. I feel stupid even saying it out loud. But I don’t think Mike ever got over it so I’m just trying to be understanding of that and follow his lead”

Eleven scrunched her nose. “I think you do not have to worry about something like that”

“Probably not” Amanda sighed. “It’s just my own silly problem that I have to learn to get over. Sorry I bugged you with it. Did you know the girl? Since you were here when you were younger”

“No” Eleven said without missing a beat. “I think that was after I left”

She remembered the words that Mike had said to her long ago: *Friends don’t lie*. But she could justify this since Amanda wasn’t

exactly her friend yet plus she had quickly learned that the rules of children did not apply to adults.

“That’s good, then. Must have been traumatic for them to lose a friend like that so young. Wonder what happened to the poor girl. I’ve never really asked any of the boys because I’m sure they don’t want to talk about it.”

“It must have been something really bad” Eleven agreed, which wasn’t even a lie this time.

“Yeah. Well...thanks anyways for listening to me. You must be annoyed, but it’s nice to have another girl around to talk about things like this with. It’s just been boys here since break started and I miss my girl friends back on campus” Amanda grinned.

Girl friends. Once again Eleven was confronted with that term. Joyce had told her that she should get some and now Amanda also mentioned them. She wondered what the difference between girl and boy friends were: if there were things that you could only tell to girl friends. She didn't know what those things would be. There wasn't anything in this world, besides secrets, that she couldn't imagine not being able to talk about with Mike, Dustin, and Lucas. Maybe she had just gotten lucky.

“You did not annoy me” Eleven said evenly, trying to say something to ease the girl’s feelings a little. “It was nice”

“Yeah, it was. I can see why the boys like talking to you so much. You’re a good listener” Amanda yawned. “Well I’m really about to

pass out now. Goodnight, El”

“Goodnight”

Amanda was fast asleep in a matter of minutes, snoring softly in her tiredness. Eleven, on the other hand, couldn't fall asleep no matter how heavy all of her limbs felt. She realized that she didn't really like the feeling of sleeping next to someone else; feeling someone's breath near her and feeling like she couldn't move at all without disturbing them. Nor did Eleven feel all that comfortable sleeping in Nancy's room where pictures of Barb were looking at her from the dresser and desk. Every time she tried to close her eyes, images of the dead girl with creatures crawling out of her mouth shone clear in her mind.

After thirty minutes of trying to unsuccessfully fall asleep, Eleven slipped out of bed as quietly as she could. She looked at the sheets that Karen had left out for them to use: her chest feeling suddenly lighter as she recognized the quilt as the one that Mike had used all those years back to make her a blanket fort in the basement.

The basement.

The thought of the place automatically made Eleven feel calm and without second thought she grabbed the blanket and pillow and made her way out of the room. The whole house was blissfully quiet and dark. She walked down the stairs and past the family room, trying to be extra quiet as she saw Ted sleeping in his recliner.

The basement looked completely different from what Eleven had

remembered. The table where the boys played their games was still there but there was a pretty lace tablecloth on it now and the chairs that surrounded it had plush sunny yellow cushions. There was a bookcase full of romance novels on one of the walls and vases of fresh flowers everywhere.

The sofa was still there and still the same, though, and Eleven immediately curled up on it, throwing the blanket over her. The basement might have looked different but it felt the same. It felt just as warm and safe as it had before and in no time, Eleven was peacefully fast asleep.

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Nancy was the one to discover that Eleven was missing the next morning.

She walked into her room to grab some clothes and saw Amanda sleeping by herself on the bed. There was no one else in the room. Thinking maybe Eleven had gotten up early like her, Nancy checked the closet and the bathroom: finding both empty. It was only after she went downstairs and found only her parents in the family room and kitchen did she start to worry. She quickly made her way back up the stairs and opened the door to Mike's room. Her brother was sleeping soundly in his bed.

Stepping over Jonathan's slumbering form, Nancy went next to her brother's bed and shook the boy awake.

Mike opened his eyes blearily "Whoosit?"

“Mike, something’s wrong” Nancy whispered, trying not to wake Jonathan up. “Eleven isn’t here”

Mike was fully awake in a matter of seconds. “What do you mean?”

“I mean she’s gone. I went to my room to grab something and she wasn’t there. She’s not in the bathroom or downstairs either”

A sense of panic that he hadn’t experienced in far too many years filled Mike to the point where he felt like he was about to black out. He clutched onto his sheets and closed his eyes tightly, willing his body not to pass out on him. His ears started to ring.

“Mike? Mike, breathe”

Nancy’s voice sounded like it was coming from miles away. This couldn’t be happening again. El had just come back, she couldn’t be gone like this again. He wouldn’t be able to handle it a second time. It would officially drive him crazy this time. All of the old emotions started to flood back and he just wanted to go and curl up in the basement like he did years before and....

“The basement!”

“What?” Nancy asked.

“The basement” Mike repeated. “Did you check the basement?”

“What? No...why? Nobody but mom goes in the basement anymore...”

Mike ignored the rest of his sister’s words as he leapt out of bed, not even making sure he didn’t step on Jonathan’s sleeping body as he rushed out of his room and down the stairs. Nancy was right that no one besides his mother went into the basement these days but he knew, call it a gut feeling or whatever else, that Eleven would be there.

And as he climbed down the stairs and saw the lanky body sleeping on the sofa, covered in the old quilt he had used to make that blanket fort years ago, Mike couldn’t help but let out a revealed sigh and smile fondly. His head felt light. It was an endearing sight in front of him, but more than that, El was there. She was okay and she was there.

He walked over to her, trying to be quiet but seemingly failing as the girl roused. She sat up a little, her hair ruffled and tousled and her eyes blinking to get read of the bleariness.

“Hey” Mike said softly. “Did I wake you up?”

“No” Eleven said, looking at Mike and then their surroundings. She winced a little. “Sorry I came down here without asking. Is it okay?”

“Of course. You have full permission to go wherever you want. You didn’t like Nancy’s room?”

“I liked it but I like it here better. It feels safe”

“It does” Mike agreed, looking around the place. “Will used to say the same thing. Any time we had a sleepover, he’d always sneak off to sleep down here. Said it was the only place he wouldn’t get nightmares”

Eleven nodded. Once again she was struck with the thought that maybe she could feel Will, that they had to be connected in some way. She didn’t say anything to Mike though, not wanting to speak her thoughts aloud until she found a way to meet with Will and actually see what was happening between them.

“Did you sleep well?”

Eleven shrugged. “It was fine”

“Amanda...didn’t bother you, did she?”

“No. She is really nice” Eleven answered. She wondered if the things the girl had said to her were supposed to be a secret and decided that they probably were.

Mike, on the other hand, tried to keep himself from sighing. He still

didn't really know if he was hoping for anything other than friendship between the two of them: he couldn't help but admit that he found Eleven to be very attractive and those old feelings of care and protectiveness were still strong. But with Eleven's lack of jealousy he figured it didn't matter anyway. She wasn't ready for anything romantic yet or if she was, then it wasn't with him.

"Mike? El? Are you down there?"

Nancy's voice sounded from the top of the stairs and Mike turned his head to see his sister standing there with a smile.

"Yeah?"

"Mom is finishing up breakfast so you two should go and get washed up and changed" the older girl said.

Mike and Eleven made their way upstairs and to their respective rooms just in time for Amanda and Jonathan to wake up. All of the kids washed their faces and changed before heading downstairs to the dining room where Karen was placing the last of the food on the table.

They all sat down and Eleven looked at the food finding, with a bit of disappointment, that there was no eggos anywhere. What kind of breakfast was this? She knew that there probably wouldn't be chocolate eggos, but not even the plain kind either?

Mike watched El, growing more and more amused at the girl's despondent look as she loaded her plate with eggs and sausage and pancakes.

"Here" he said, taking the maple syrup from the center of the table and pouring it all over her plate, knowing how much she loved sweet things. "Try this"

"Mike, stop ruining El's food with your gross preferences" Nancy scowled.

Eleven took a bite of sausage covered in maple syrup and smiled widely as the sweetness drenched her tongue. She licked her lips before going in for a second bite.

"See, I knew she would like it" Mike said, a little smugly. Nancy just sneered at him. She resisted the urge to stick out her tongue since they had company over. She didn't want to look like a kid in front of Amanda and Joyce and definitely not Jonathan.

"So, El, how long will you be staying in Hawkins, dear?" Karen said as the table quieted down, trying to get to know the new girl.

"I will be living here"

"We're hoping she'll stay here for good" Joyce added in with a smile, squeezing the girl's knee under the table.

Ted narrowed his eyes as he looked at Eleven, thinking there was something very familiar about the young girl. His wife had told him that she had been Mike's friend when he was younger but he never recognized most of his kids' friends normally.

"You don't happen to have any Russian relatives do you?" he asked

"Not...that I know" Eleven answered.

Karen shot her husband a 'you better shut up' look and the man went back to his food with a shrug. He knew he was better off just staying out of everything. But there really was something familiar with that new Byers girl...

Everyone started eating again in relative silence, punctured only by little Holly prattling on about pop singers every now and then. The girl was 10 now with huge eyes and a head of bright golden hair that was in stark contrast with her siblings' brown locks. She also seemed to be keenly interested in singers that nobody knew anything about.

"I want to do my hair like Mariah Carey" Holly whined to the table, tugging at one of her ponytails. Amanda, the busy pre-law student; Nancy the even more busy medical student; Mike the computer nerd; and grunge-obsessed Jonathan had no idea what the little girl was talking about.

"I think your hair looks good straight" Eleven said instead, rather calmly "It wouldn't look so nice if it was curly like Mariah's"

Mike looked at Eleven with his mouth wide open. Jonathan, Nancy, and Joyce were equally as surprised but they were able to hide it much better.

“You know Mariah?” Holly asked, eyes crinkling in glee at the thought of finally finding an ally among her brother’s friends.

“Of course, she’s great” Eleven answered. She had actually never heard a Mariah Carey song before, but she knew all about the singer and most other singers thanks to those magazines and their love of celebrity gossip. Back in the Labs, she would even sometimes imagine that she was a pop idol that was living a glamorous life and was loved by everyone. It was always a good escape during the more grueling days.

Holly lit up like a Christmas tree and spent the rest of breakfast nearly glued to Eleven’s side, having deep discussions about Vanessa Williams’ creepy husband and if Bryan Adams was dating anyone.

As Karen got up to put all the dishes away, Holly looked at her family and announced, with a big smile on her face “El is my favorite friend that Mike has”

“Holly...” Karen said a little hesitantly, sneaking a glance over at Amanda who looked shocked and a bit affronted. “All of Mike’s friends are lovely...”

“El is the best, though” Holly said with a shrug. Jonathan grinned

widely and gave the girl a subtle thumbs up.

“You’ll be my friend too, right?” Holly asked Eleven with those wide eyes and the older girl couldn’t help but agree. She knew that she had a long future of never being able to refuse anything Holly asked.

“Yes...sure...yes. We are friends”

Holly giggled and led the girl out of the dining room and to her bedroom, showing off her music collection and pictures of male singers that she had cut out from magazines and taped to her wall much to her father’s disapproval. Eleven recognized most all of the pictures and was able to discuss what articles they had come from, much to Holly’s amazement and delight.

Mike, Nancy, and Jonathan quickly realized that Eleven must have had access to magazines in the Lab and instead became quite impressed by the girl’s memorization ability. They were sure that, had she been allowed to have a normal life and education, Eleven could have been quite the academic.

And Amanda was just confused by the whole scene. She could understand Holly being bestowed with El, even if she was slightly bitter after the hours she had spent teaching the little girl how to braid hair and paint flower designs on her nails, but everyone else was acting too strangely. Mike and Nancy seemed almost awed, as though El was spouting off sections of the encyclopedia from heart and not just talking about pop singer gossip. The whole situation was weird.

It was an hour later that Joyce was finally able to wrangle the kids away from the group. Eleven had to promise Holly to visit often and Mike, privately, once again promised Jonathan to stop visiting Eleven at night. Nancy hugged Eleven deeply, telling her to keep in touch for anything she needed. And Amanda waved at her with a still-confused smile: any good feelings that had been created the night before now dwarfed by the awkward morning she had.

All seemed right with the little group until Jonathan pulled up to their house and found Hopper's car parked in the front.

"Why is the chief here?" he asked his mother. The worry was palpable in his voice.

"I asked him to come" Joyce answered quickly, trying to ease her son. The three of them got out of the car. "We need to have a little chat"

Jonathan's eyebrows raised. "Oh? Are we getting a new dad?"

Joyce gaped at her eldest. "No! Jonathan! What...no! Hop wanted to come to talk to El"

"To me?" Eleven asked as they made their way to the porch where Hopper was sitting on the front steps, waiting.

"I was starting to worry the Wheelers had kidnapped you" the man said gruffly. Joyce rolled her eyes as she took the keys from Jonathan

to open the front door. The four of them entered the house, Hopper immediately appreciating the warmth. He took his jacket off to hang it on the rack, finding in amusement the other jacket that he thought he had lost.

“I forgot I gave that to you, kid” he said to Eleven as he motioned to his coat.

“You can take it back”

“Yeah, El has found someone better to steal a jacket from now” Joyce jested, winking at Eleven as the girl took off Mike’s bright blue coat. Eleven smiled back sheepishly.

“You want something to drink, Hop?” Joyce continued as she walked into the kitchen. “Water? Coffee?”

“I’ll take some whiskey if you have it. This headache is kicking the shit out of me” Hopper mumbled.

Joyce stuck her head out of the kitchen, her face clearly judgmental. “It’s not even noon yet”

“Coffee it is then”

Joyce retreated back into the kitchen while Hopper went into the family room and took a seat on one of the oversized chairs,

grumbling about how no one these days appreciated a harmless bit of day drinking. Eleven followed tentatively. She sat down on the sofa and Jonathan sat right next to her, throwing a comforting arm across her shoulder.

“Joyce said you wanted to talk to me?”

Hopper nodded. “She told me that you wanted to get a job”

“Is...that okay?” The people in the Lab had given her a list of things that she couldn’t do: talk about any of their experiments, use her power, discuss the war...but they had never said anything about her not being able to get a job. She wondered if they had given Hopper rules for her as well.

“Yeah, kid, it’s okay for you to get a job. No one here is going to force you to just stay at home. No ones going to force you to stay anywhere anymore. You get that?”

Eleven nodded. She wasn’t used to the forceful tone but she was thankful for the words nevertheless.

“What we wanted to talk to you about were your papers” Hopper continued as Joyce came out of the kitchen with two mugs of coffee, one which she handed to the man and the other which Jonathan waved off.

“My papers?”

“Your identification papers. Things like your birth certificate and ID”

“Oh!” Eleven gasped. She had always just assumed that she didn’t have any of those things. She was Project Eleven, after all. A project, not a person. “I don’t have those...”

“Well actually you do” Hopper said as he took out a folder that he had brought over from his place before going to the Byers house. It was navy blue and had the Hawkins Lab logo stamped on the front. "I was planning on giving these to you anyways, they're yours to have"

He passed the folder to Eleven, who opened it in record speed. Inside were her birth certificate, social security card, health records, and even a fully up to date passport. It was the birth certificate that interested her the most and she took it out to read it.

*Date of Birth: June 1st 1971*

She had a birthday. She knew that she had to have one, but no one had said anything to her about it before. There certainly were never any parties but there was also no mention of her getting older every year when June rolled around. It was such a little, probably insignificant, thing: her birthday. But just knowing that she had one made Eleven feel more human than she had in a long time.

The next thing that caught her attention was the name at the top of the certificate.

*Birth Name: Jane Ives*

“Jane” Eleven said in a whisper, fingers tracing the name. She looked up at Jonathan and then Joyce and Hopper. “My name is Jane?”

“That...that’s your birth name” Joyce explained. “You don’t have to go by it if you don’t want to but we thought you needed to know. About that and about...your mom”

Eleven’s eyes immediately went back to the certificate. The space for father’s name was left blank but there was a bold “Terry Ives” next to ‘mother’. She sat, shocked and silent, as she let the realization rush over her.

“Hop and I went to see her before” Joyce rambled on. “Back when you came here the first time; when we were trying to find Will. She’s not well. At least...she wasn’t”

Joyce turned her head and looked at Hopper in horror. Honestly, neither of them had any idea if Terry Ives was still catatonic or even if she was still alive. Oh god, what if she wasn’t alive anymore? Joyce didn’t know what she would do if she brought Eleven’s hope up only to find out that her mother was actually gone. They should have prepared better for this, should have checked up on the Ives to see what their situation was...should have done so much more than what they had.

Hopper saw the distress on the woman’s face and took over for her.

"We're not going to lie to you, kid. Neither of us have seen Terry since eight years ago. We don't know what state she's in now. She wasn't doing great when we met her so I can only assume she's the same or maybe even worse..."

"We have her address, though" Joyce picked up. "If you want to meet her, Hop and I can take you. It's up to you, whatever you want. If you want to meet Terry, if you want us to call you Jane...you can choose whatever. No pressure"

Eleven looked down at the folder in her hands once again. It was too much information to process and too much to take in. For 20 years she had been nothing but *Project Eleven*: a government experiment, a tool used for war. Besides that one week eight years ago, experiments and cold, clinical labs were all there was to her life. And now she was slowly coming to the realization that part of her actually was like everyone else. There were normal things about her. She had a birthday, a full name, a mother...

*She had a mother.* A sick mother, if what Hopper and Joyce said was still true, but a mother nevertheless. A real family member. Eleven had always imagined having a mother: someone who would whisk her away from the Lab and would cook for her, tuck her into bed, hold her when she was sick and crying and tired and bleeding. She figured that she would be delighted if she found out that there actually was a mother for her out there somewhere. But now she realized that she was far from delighted. In fact, the thought terrified her.

What if her real mother didn't want her? Why would she? Eleven knew she wasn't a normal person. She was a weirdo, definitely not anyone's first choice to have as a child.

And Eleven liked the life she was currently living. She liked staying with Joyce and Jonathan. She liked having Mike, Lucas, and Dustin close by. Everything here felt warm and safe and she wanted to keep it that way. Why would she give any of this up for the high possibility of being rejected by a woman she'd never met? She knew that she'd have to meet Terry one day: there was no way that she would be able to go through her whole life without at least meeting her real mother. But for now, she wanted to hold on to this warmth for as long as she could.

Maybe one day she could become Jane Ives. But right now, she was happy just being El.

"I want to still be called El, if that's okay" she said softly. Jonathan squeezed her shoulder.

"Of course" he said. "Of course it's okay. You'll always be El to us anyway"

"We won't bring up Terry again unless you want us to" Joyce added. Hopper nodded at her side. He didn't know how exactly to be comforting so he just reached over and squeezed one of the girl's knobby knees in what he hoped was a reassuring gesture.

She smiled back at him, looking a little more relaxed, and he thought that maybe he wasn't so bad at this whole thing.

And as Eleven looked between Hopper, Joyce, and Jonathan she

became a bit more comfortable with the thought of Terry Ives and what she would find there. Even if the woman wanted nothing to do with her, it would be okay. It would hurt, but it would be okay. She had this little family right here and that was all she really needed.

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The boys were all set to leave four days after New Years: Mike heading off to Purdue and Dustin and Lucas going back to Notre Dame to start their spring terms. They had brought Eleven a map of Indiana and marked the cities where their universities were. Notre Dame seemed a bit far away but, much to Eleven's delight, Purdue was really close to Hawkins: which was located right in between the university and a big dot labeled 'Indianapolis'.

"That's the big city" Lucas pointed out the night before they left.
"They've got a lot of cool stuff that we don't get in Hawkins. We'll take you there when we come back for break"

"When do you have your next break?"

"Next long break is in the spring" Dustin sighed. Term hadn't even started yet and he was already looking forward to spring break "but we come back to Hawkins all the time since it's not too far away. So we'll still be around to bug you"

"I wrote our numbers on the back of the map" Mike said as he flipped the paper over to reveal two numbers scrawled in sharpie. "This is my apartment and this is Dustin and Lucas'. We'll call you all the time, but if you ever need anything or just want to talk you can call

us too.”

“Please call us” Dustin semi-begged. “It’s so boring only having Lucas to listen to all day”

Lucas scoffed. “You’re talking like your whiny voice is something I love to hear”

“Ignore those two” Mike said “You’re going to be calling me the most”

“No fair, you live by yourself” Dustin whined.

“All the more reason for her to call me instead! I’m the one who’s all alone”

“You want Lucas, then? I’ll mail him to you”

“Hey!”

“I can call all of you” Eleven said with a giggle, breaking up the boys’ banter. They were all sitting on the porch of the Byers’ house, watching the sun set. The past week and a half had been almost idyllic and Eleven was going to miss this a lot when the boys were gone.

There were other adventures that awaited her: Joyce had found her a job in a bakery and Jonathan had promised to teach her how to drive. But Eleven knew that none of those things could compare to just sitting on the front porch and spending time with the only friends that she had ever known.

“I don’t want to leave” Dustin sighed, speaking what was on everyone’s minds “It feels wrong to go off again when you just came back”

Eleven didn’t want them to leave either, but she knew they had to. It was what Eleanor had called *responsibility*: she said that all adults had them. And they were all adults now, each with their own responsibilities. It didn’t stop her from not wanting them to go, though.

“We’ll come back to Hawkins really often to see you” Lucas said “It’s a promise”

“Hopper told me that adults don’t do promises, they make deals”

Mike frowned. “Well screw being adults, then. The four of us have always done promises. It’s our thing”

“Plus we’re only 20” Dustin added on “We’ve got ages until we have to act like adults”

“Please, like you’ll ever act like an adult”

“Sinclair, I swear to god...”

Mike ignored the mini fight developing next to him and turned to Eleven, who was just staring off into the sky. The warm orange light from the setting sun washed over her olive skin, making it appear almost sunkissed even in the dusk. She turned to him and her hazel eyes crinkled in a smile.

“I really do promise to come visit you”

“I know”

“And you’ve got to promise to take care of yourself, okay? Don’t let anybody bully you into doing things you don’t want to do. Not even Mrs. Byers or Jonathan”

“Okay”

“And don’t get too close to those two idiots over there. They’re nothing but trouble”

Eleven looked over at Dustin and Lucas who had dissolved into some sort of game of slaps, scowling and yelling at each other. She laughed. “Okay”

“You trash talking us, Wheeler?” Dustin asked, slapping away Lucas’ hands to glare at Mike and Eleven. “I can sue you for slander”

“It’s not slander if it’s true” Mike sang back and the boys once again got caught up in a squabbling match as Eleven watched in amusement: refusing to take a side no matter how much any of the boys begged her to.

They left soon after the sun set, once again promising to come and visit within the next few weekends. The fact they were all going to stay in the same state was a comfort to Eleven. She knew that it would be easy for them to come see her and once she learned how to drive she could go and see them too. It wasn’t the same as them all being in the same town, but it still okay.

Jonathan poked his head out a few moments after the boys left, smiling as he saw Eleven sitting by herself on the porch. He walked out and sat next to her.

“Glad to see that Mike kept the deal we made”

“What deal?” Eleven asked

“To not come and bother you at night anymore”

“He is not bothering me”

“Yeah? Well him coming here bothers *me*. Don’t let guys sneak out to go see you at night”

Eleven snorted. “Boys seem to have a lot of rules” Not even Eleanor had given her as many ‘rules’ as Mike and Jonathan had.

“Boys like rules. We’re an uncomplicated breed” Jonathan answered easily.

“So do girls like breaking the rules?”

Jonathan laughed. “Maybe some girls”

Eleven nodded. She thought that maybe she wanted to be that kind of girl.

“I wanted to talk to you about something” Jonathan said after a few moments. “I know that we said we wouldn’t bring it up until you said something but...I’m going to visit Will this weekend and I have to go through Indianapolis to get to Pennhurst”

Eleven nodded again, thinking of the big dot on the map.

“Terry. She lives in Indianapolis, I saw the address that Hopper gave mom. I can take you there on my way”

Silence stretched between the two as Eleven stared at her hands, wondering what to say. Of course she wanted to meet Terry one day, probably one day very soon. But she didn't know if she was ready yet. And besides, there was a person that she wanted to meet even more right now.

"Maybe we can go see Terry later" she said finally.

"Yeah, sure. Later. There's no rush"

Eleven looked up at Jonathan and bit her bottom lip. "Do you think..."

"Do I think?"

"Do you think I could come with you to see Will?"

Jonathan looked at her in surprise. "You want to visit Will?"

Eleven nodded eagerly. A feeling of something akin to hope bubbled in her chest "I've been wanting to meet him since I came back. I think that we can help each other."

Jonathan was silent for a few seconds before he shrugged. Maybe the girl was right. Her and Will probably had a lot more in common than they would feel comfortable sharing with other people. Maybe Eleven really could help ease his little brother's constant fears. It was worth

a try if nothing else. They had already tried nearly everything.
“Okay”

“Okay?”

“Okay. We’ll go visit Will together this weekend”

Notes for the Chapter:

So here this is. This chapter didn't have too much action, but the next few in a row will and I had to set up the basic plot for those. Hope I gave you a little more insight to the way some of the characters are thinking. I know the boys leaving was probably a little anticlimactic, but they really will call and visit often so it's not like they're going to be truly gone.

I also finally sat down and drafted exactly what I wanted to put in each chapter so I could come up with a final number of chapters...which turned out to be 15. So we've still got a pretty long road ahead of us :)

Next chapter I am most excited about writing because El will finally meet Will. Of course other things will happen too, but I can't even begin to describe how happy I am to finallllly be able to bring Will into this story. He's for sure one of my favorite characters and I hope you guys will love him as well!